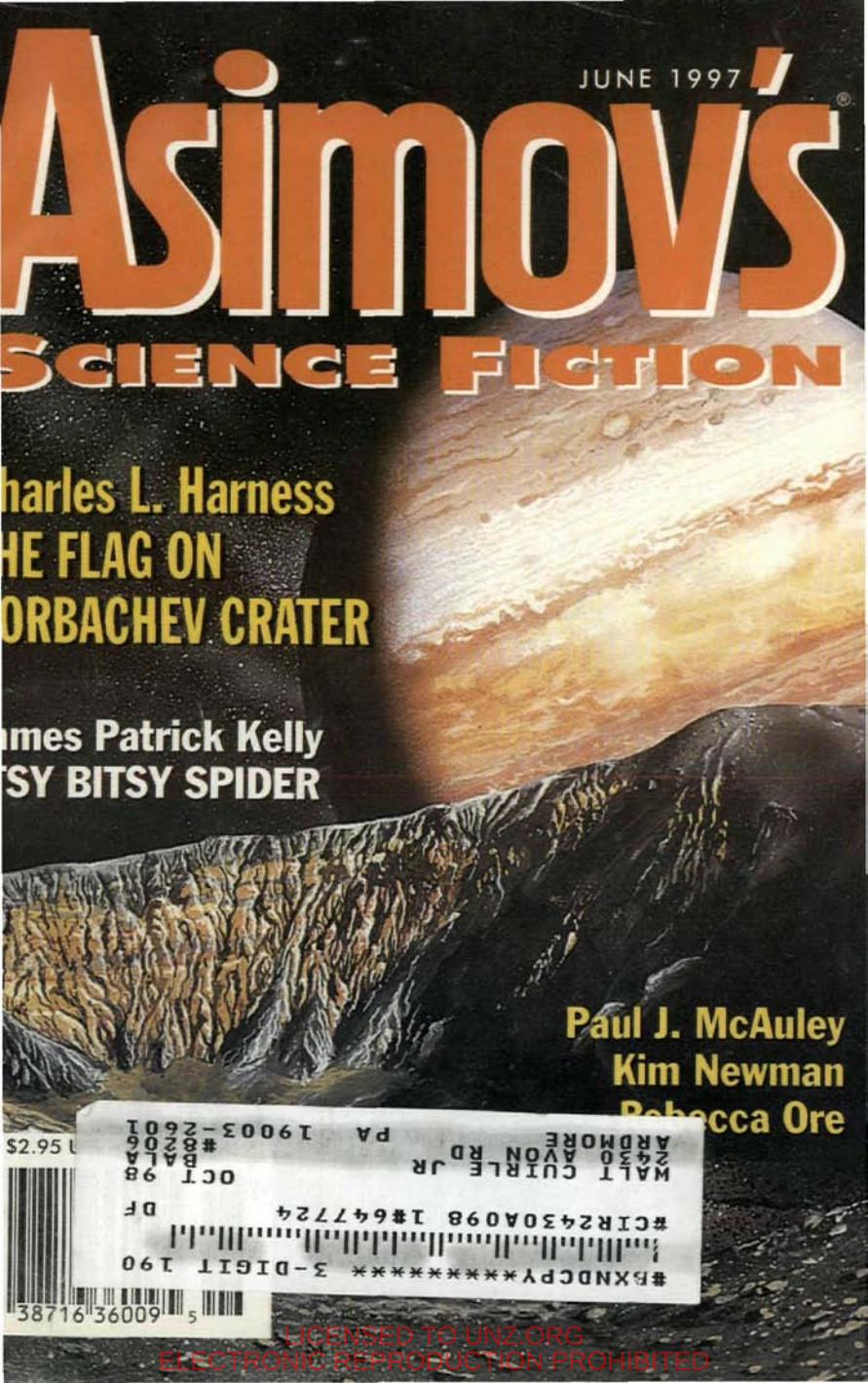

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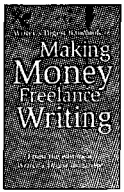

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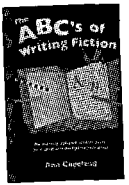

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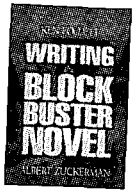

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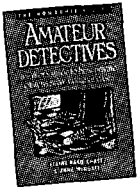

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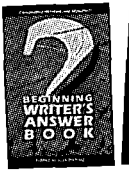

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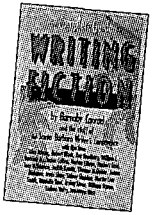

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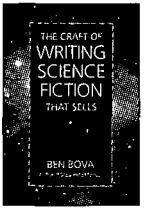

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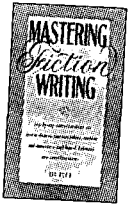

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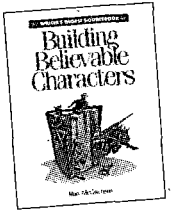

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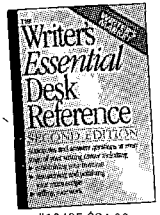

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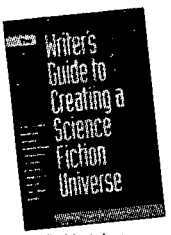

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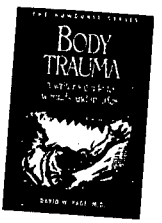

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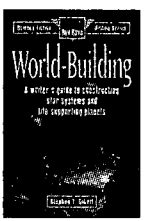

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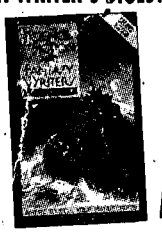
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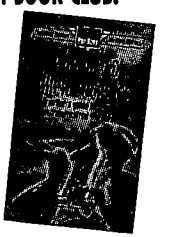
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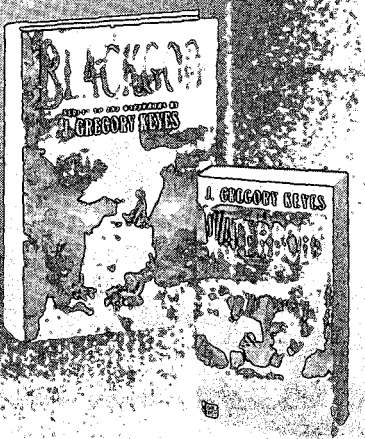

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE SENSE OF AN ENDING

There are only three really difficult challenges in the construction of a successful story, I like to say: the beginning, the middle, and the end.

Of these, the beginning is, I think, the easiest part, though it's by no means easy. The right place to open a story has been known for thousands of years: *in medias res,* "in the middle of things." Jump into the action, fill in the background later. Thus *The Iliad,* instead of opening by telling us that there was once a war between the Trojans and the Greeks during which two great Greek chieftains fell into a bitter quarrel, starts off fast: "The wrath of Achilles is my theme, that fatal wrath that brought the Greeks such suffering. . . ." Dante's *Inferno* tells us in its first stanza that the poet has become lost in a dark forest that turns out to lead to Hell's gateway. And Milton's *Paradise Lost,* not generally noted for its swift narrative pace, loses no time in getting under way: "Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit of that forbidden tree . . . Sing, heavenly muse."

Less exalted writers than Homer, Dante, and Milton call this kind of opening "a narrative hook"—something that catches and holds the reader's interest, while at the same time implicitly stating the theme of the work about to begin. The hook that comes most quickly to my mind in science fiction is Henry Kuttner's classic line from *The Fairy Chessmen*: "The doorknob opened a blue eye and looked at him." Gimmicky, perhaps, but unforgettable. You don't have to be as clever as that, though, to get a story going: you just need to locate the middle of the action and zero in on it for your opening paragraph.

As for the *actual* middle of the story you are writing—well, that's hard because it involves you in all the grueling work of connecting the beginning and the end (that is, making up all the stuff that goes in between, a process that's known as *writing a story*). It isn't easy, because no part of writing stories is easy. But, whereas doing beginnings requires cunning and artfulness, doing middles requires, mainly, endurance: the ability to plod along from one page to the next, holding your reader enthralled at every moment, until you are ready to deliver your ending. And then, your ending—ah, your ending—

Damon Knight, in an essay long ago on Philip K. Dick's novel *Solar Lottery,* spoke of the part of a book that he calls "the summing up, that place where the author has

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got to try to say what his novel means and where he thinks it leads." I doubt that Knight meant that he expects a writer to tell us those things literally and explicitly, in some flat-footed kind of bottom-line summary; what I think Knight was saying is that a book (or a story, or a play or a narrative or epic poem) should *have* a meaning, and its author should know what it is, and the closing scenes of that book (or whatever) should contain in their very fabric an implicit summary of the intention of the entire work, as well as drawing together all the thematic material out of which the work has been constructed. It is the final payoff to the reader for his attention.

A work of fiction has a whole series of payoffs, of course. An engaging plot. Interesting people along the way who conduct the action of that plot. Fascinating scenery to look at in the course of that action. And, perhaps, memorable use of language as well. But the ending of that work is the key point, for it rounds things into a dramatically satisfying whole and prepares you to take your departure in wiser and nobler condition than when you arrived. I'm not talking here about the closing sentence or sentences, which deliver a story's final "punch"—I mean the part that comes a little earlier, which announces *that the work is now moving into its climactic passages.* I've observed that the creator of a truly satisfying work of fiction invariably signals the advent of that final section with a detectable

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change of tone—providing what the literary critic Frank Kermode has called "the sense of an ending."

Consider Wagner's *Ring* cycle of operas: seventeen hours of epic music drama showing nothing less than the downfall of the Nordic gods, and culminating in a complex, violent scene in which the stage is strewn with bodies and the only surviving protagonist who remains in view is Brünnhilde, the tragic goddess-turned-mortal who is a central figure in three of the four operas. At this point there is a complete change of pace: a slow, portentous musical interlude, and then Brünnhilde, in a state of solemn exaltation, launches into a grand solo scene nearly twenty minutes long in which she directs the construction of the funeral pyre of the hero Siegfried ("Stack the great logs in piles for me, over there by the shore of the Rhine"); retells the story of his great achievements; recapitulates the entire mythic history of the Ring; sets Valhalla, the home of the gods, ablaze; and calmly, joyfully, rides her horse into the flames, bringing this great series of operas to a stunning and emphatic climax. *That's* what I mean by providing a sense of an ending!

Take Shakespeare. *Antony and Cleopatra,* for example: the tumultuous love affair of those two brings an empire crashing down, sends Antony to a miserable death, and leaves Cleopatra isolated with the Roman forces closing in on her. Antony, in his Act Four death scene, sounds the first note of the ending: "Unarm, Eros, the long day's task is done, and we must sleep." But it's a false signal, and we know it, for Cleopatra (though Antony isn't aware of it) still lives, and a fifth act will be needed to despatch her. In that act we watch Cleopatra guilefully fend off the Romans and then coolly arrange her own suicide, and then, at last, there is that pause and change of tone that we also detect at the moment of Brünnhilde's farewell, and we hear Cleopatra, ready for her death, quietly say, "Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have immortal longings in me now." And we know that the day is truly done, that all her striving is at an end and the play, shortly, will be also.

We get that sudden and mysterious change of tone in *Othello,* too, when Othello enters the bedroom of the sleeping Desdemona to murder her. "It is the cause," he says quietly, "it is the cause, my soul; let me not name it to you, you chaste stars! It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood."

And James Joyce: a magnificent practitioner of the technique of closing a story. In his novella, "The Dead," a family dinner party has brought Gabriel Conroy to awareness of a youthful romance of his wife with a boy now dead, a romance that still lingers in her heart. The knowledge sobers him and darkens his mood, for it calls to his mind his own emotional inadequacies. And then, when the party is over, Joyce lets us hear the first music of the ending:

"The air of the room chilled his

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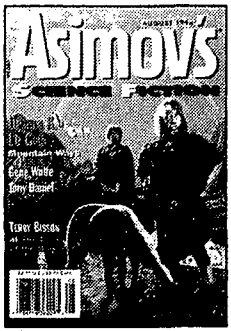

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shoulders. He stretched himself cautiously along under the sheets and lay down beside his wife. One by one, they were all becoming shades. Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age." And so on to the glorious final sentence: "His soul swooned slowly as he heard the falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead."

Joyce does it again in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "Away? Away? The spell of arms and voices: the white arms of roads, their promise of close embraces and the black arms of tall ships that stand against the moon, their tale of distant nations. They are held out to say: We are alone—come." Even without context, we can tell that something important is happening, as Joyce goes on to his great conclusion: "Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race. . . . Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead."

Joyce provides powerful closure in *Ulysses*, too, Molly Bloom's thirty-page soliloquy sweeping us along to that breathless "and yes I said yes I will," and even in the bewildering *Finnegans Wake*, with its majestic final words abruptly looping us around and thrusting us back to the book's opening sentence.

Homer—Dante—Wagner—Joyce—

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what about our own little field?

Well, in Isaac Asimov's wondrous "Nightfall," we get this:

"And then there was the strange awareness that the last thread of sunlight had thinned out and snapped. Simultaneously, he heard one last choking gasp from Beenay, and a queer little cry from Sheerin, a hysterical giggle that cut off in a rasp—and a sudden silence, a strange, deadly silence from outside."

Arthur C. Clarke, in *2001*:

"The timeless instant passed; the pendulum reversed its swing. In an empty room, floating amid the fires of a double star twenty thousand light-years from Earth, a baby opened its eyes and began to cry."

Theodore Sturgeon, in *More Than Human*:

"It was quiet in the glass room.

"For a long time the only sound was Gerry's difficult breathing. Suddenly even this stopped, as something happened, something—*spoke.*

"It came again.

"Welcome."

And one more—*Kingdoms of the Wall,* by—why not?—Robert Silverberg:

"For a long time nothing happened; and then we saw dust rising around the ship, and moments later a pillar of fire burst into life beneath it, and lifted it upward. The little gleaming ship stood as if motionless before us an instant or two on its fiery tail. Then it was gone. It vanished from our sight as though it had never been.

"I said, 'These were the true gods. And now they have left us.'

"With that, and with no other word being spoken, we began to make ready for our descent from the Summit."

That sense of an ending. That subtle signal to the reader that all is over and done, that the summing-up has been reached, that the account is being tallied. Doing that right is the hardest part of writing a story. ●

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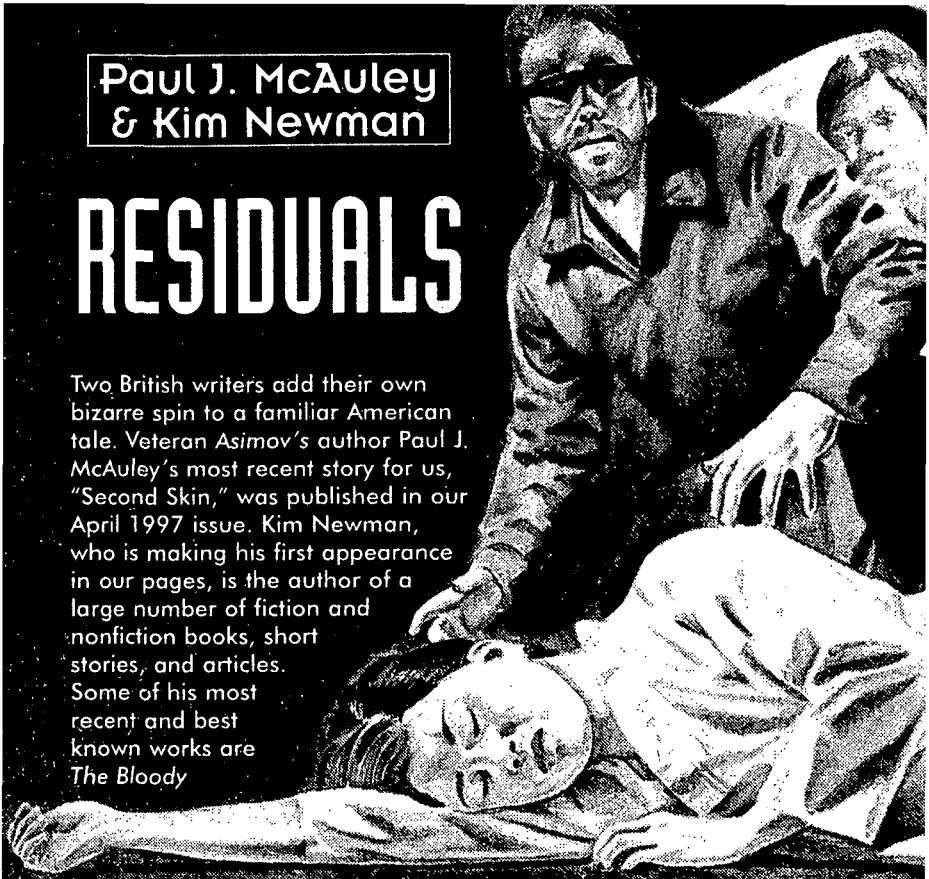

Two British writers add their own bizarre spin to a familiar American tale. Veteran *Asimov's* author Paul J. McAuley's most recent story for us, "Second Skin," was published in our April 1997 issue. Kim Newman, who is making his first appearance in our pages, is the author of a large number of fiction and nonfiction books, short stories, and articles. Some of his most recent and best known works are *The Bloody Red Baron* (Carroll & Graf/Avon, 1995), *Anno Dracula* (Carroll & Graf/Avon, 1992), and with Stephen Jones, *Horror: 100 Best Books* (Carroll & Graf, 1992). Mr. Newman and Mr. McAuley are also the co-editors of *In Dreams* (Gollancz, 1992), an anthology of stories about popular music/culture.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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On his way out, the motel guy switches on the TV and the AC without bothering to ask if I want either. The unit over the door rattles and starts to drip on the purple shag carpet. On a dusty screen, a cowboy hunkers down over the Sci-Fi Channel station ident, squinting from under a Stetson. It ought to be like looking at myself because the cowboy is supposed to be me. But it's not.

The Omega Encounter is always playing somewhere on a rerun channel, I guess, but here and now it's like an omen.

I'm still living off the *Omega* residuals because it's *my* version of what went down, officially adapted from the "as told to" book Jay Anson did for me. Nyquist sold *Starlight,* the book Tom Fuckin' Wolfe wrote with him, for twenty times as much to Universal.

There's a little skip where there used to be a shot of a fly-blown, bloodied rubber cow carcass. It could be a censor cut or a snip to reduce the running time. When E.W. Swackhamer directed *Omega,* there were thirteen minutes of commercials in an hour of TV; now there are eighteen, so five minutes of each hour have to be lost from everything made before the nineties.

I don't unpack, except for the bottles of Cuervo Gold Tequila I bought at the airport, and sit up on the bed, watching two days of my life processed and packaged as a sixteen-year-old movie-of-the-week.

It's gotten to the part where I find the first of the mutilated cattle. I'm showing one to Mr. Nyquist, played by Dennis Weaver the way he plays McCloud, shrewd and upright. To tell the truth, Nyquist was always half bombed even before it all started, and had a mean streak in him that was nothing to do with drink. The bastard would hit Susan when he was loaded, going off like a firecracker over the slightest thing and stomping out, banging the screen door hard, leaving her holding her cheek and me looking down at my dinner. He was crazy even then, I guess, but still able to hold it down.

The movie makes me a lot more talkative than I ever was around Nyquist. Susan is Cybill Shepherd in her post-*Last Picture Show,* pre-*Moonlighting* career slump. I am Jan-Michael Vincent in his post-birth, pre-death career trough.

I watch until I follow the slime trails in the grass and see the lights of the mothership off in the distance hovering above the slough, and then I flip channels because I can't stand to watch anymore.

They didn't have the budget to do the aliens properly on TV and only used long shots, but I still don't want to watch. I can take the expensive computer-controlled models in the movie because they're too real in the way Main Street in Disneyland is too real. So perfect a reproduction it doesn't fool anyone for a second. But show me a couple of out-of-focus midgets jumping around inside silvered plastic bags in slow motion with the setting sun behind them, and my imagination fills in the blanks. The

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sour reek. And the noise the things made as they hopped around, like they were filled with Jell-O and broken bones.

QVC is less of a blow to the heart. I drink tequila out of the bathroom glass and consider calling a toll-free number to order a zircon chandelier. Then I drink some more and decide against it.

Despite Steven Spielberg, Harrison Ford (as Nyquist), and five million preinflation bucks of ILM, *Starlight: The Motion Picture* was a box-office disappointment. By the time the effects were developed, *Omega* had spun off a mid-season replacement series with Sam Groom (as me) and Gretchen Corbett that got canceled after three episodes. The aliens were old news, and everybody knew how the story came out. In *Starlight*, I'm rewritten as a codger farmhand who sacrifices himself for Boss Man Ford, stealing the film with a dignified death scene. Richard Farnsworth got an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor, but lost out to the gook in *The Killing Fields*.

I give up TV and call my agent, using the room phone because my mobile doesn't want to work out here in the desert, all that radar, or the microwave signals they send to the secret Moon colony (ha ha), and I tell him where I am. He says to watch my ass, and that when I get back he thinks he might have another hardware store commercial lined up ("fix your Starship, lady?"). It's just for New York cable, but it'll pay the rent a while. He doesn't think I can pull off this reunion, is what it is, and I tell him that, and then I hang up and I watch an old *Saturday Night Live* for a while.

I was on one show for about five minutes, in a Conehead episode with Dan Ackroyd and Jane Curtin. Can't hardly remember that night—I was drunk at the time—but now I guess those five minutes are always showing somewhere, just like everything else that ever went through a transmitter. If aliens out there have been monitoring our broadcasts like they did in old movies to explain why they speak perfect English, just about the first question we'd ask them was if they taped those lost episodes of *The Honeymooners*. I watch Chevy Chase do Jerry Ford falling over just about everything in the studio set, and drink some more tequila, and fall asleep a while.

It's been a long day, the flight out from New York delayed two hours, then a long drive through Los Angeles, where I've never driven because I was chauffeured around when all the deals were in the air, and which is ten times more packed with traffic than I remember, and out into the high desert along Pearblossom Highway with all the big trucks driving in bright sunlight and blowing dust with their headlights on.

The phone wakes me up. I use the remote to turn down Dave Letterman, and pick up. A voice I haven't heard for twenty years says, "Hello, Ray."

* * *

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At first, only the *Enquirer* and the *Weekly World News* were interested. But when the reports came back and the FBI slapped a security classification on them, and Elliot Mitchell started making a fuss because he was transferred to the Texas panhandle and his field notes and his twenty rolls of film and six hours of cassette recordings were "lost," *Newsweek* and *Rolling Stone* showed up. Tom Wicker's piece in *Rolling Stone* said it was all part of a government plot stretching back to Roswell, and that the U.S. Army was covering up tests with hallucinogenic weapons.

Then the artifacts went on view, and ten types of expert testified they were "non-terrestrial." It wasn't a government conspiracy any more, it was a goddamn alien *invasion,* just like Nyquist and me had been saying. Mitchell had rewritten his field notes from memory, and sent photocopies to *Science* and *Nature*. He even got his name as discoverer on the new hyperstable transuranic element, which along with the bodies was one of the few tangible residues of the whole thing. I wonder how he felt when Mitchellite was used in the Gulf War to add penetrative power to artillery shells?

Then the Washington *Post* got behind the story, and all the foreign press, and the shit hit the fan. For a while, it was all anybody talked about. We got to meet President Carter, who made a statement supporting our side of things, and declared he would see that no information was withheld from the public.

I was on the *Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson, back when that meant something. I did Dick Cavett, *CBS News* with Walter Cronkite, *60 Minutes* with Mike Wallace, *NBC Weekend News* with Jessica Savitch. Me and Nyquist were scurrying to get our book deals sorted out, then our screen rights. People were crawling all over, desperate to steal our lives, and we went right along with the feeding frenzy.

We wrapped each other up with restraints and gag orders, and shot off our mouths all the time. Mitchell was out of the loop: instead of deals with Hollywood producers and long lunches with New York publishers, he got tied up in a civil liberties suit because he tried to resign from the U.S. geological survey and the government wouldn't let him.

Then the Ayatollah took the hostages, and everyone had something else to worry about. Carter became a hostage in his own White House and most of the artifacts disappeared in the C-130 aircrash the conspiracy theorists said was staged. Reagan never said anything on record, but the official line changed invisibly when he became President. The reports on the reports questioned the old findings, and deposits of Mitchellite showed up on Guam and somewhere in Alaska.

I did *Geraldo* with Whitley Strieber and Carl Sagan, and came off like a hick caught between a rock and a hard place. I had started drinking by then, and tried to punch out one or the other of them after the show, and spent the night in a downtown holding tank. I faced a jury of skeptics on

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Oprah and was cut to pieces, not by reasoned scientific arguments and rationalizations but by cheap-shot jokes from a studio audience of stand-up wannabes.

I told my side of it so many times that I caught myself using exactly the same words each time, and I noticed that on pre-recorded shows, the presenter's nods and winks—always shot from a reverse angle after the main interview—were always cut in at exactly the same points. An encouraging dip of the head laced with a concerned look in the eyes, made in reaction to a cameraman's thumb, not an already-forgotten line from me.

Besides *The Omega Encounter* and *Starlight,* there were dozens of books, movies, TV specials, magazine articles, a Broadway play, even a music album. Creedence Clearwater Revival's "It Came Out of the Sky" was reissued and charted strongly. Some English band did a concept album. John Sladek and Tom Disch collaborated on a novel-length debunking, *The Sentients: A Tragi-Comedy.* That's in development as a movie, maybe with Fred Ward.

Sam Shepard's *Alienation,* which Ed Harris did on Broadway and Shepard starred in and directed for HBO, looked at it all from the dirt farmer's point of view, suggesting that Nyquist and me were looking for fresh ways of being heroes since we'd lost touch with the land. The main character was a combination of the two of us, and talked in paragraphs, and the scientist—Dean Stockwell on TV—was a black-hatted villain, which displeased Mitchell no end. He sued and lost, I recall.

By then I was looking at things through the blurry dimple at the bottom of the bottle, living off the residuals from commercials and guest appearances in rock videos and schlock direct-to-video horror movies shot by postmodernist *auteurs* just out of UCLA film school, though I recall that Sam Raimi's *The Color Out of Time* was kind of not bad.

Then I read in *Variety* that Oliver Stone has a treatment in development raking the whole thing up, blaming it all on J. Edgar Hoover, Armand Hammer and Henry Kissinger. There was an article in the New York *Times* that Norman Mailer had delivered his thousand-page summation of the phenomenon, *The Visitation.* And that's where I got the idea to get in touch with Mitchell and make some cash on the back of Stone and Mailer's publicity, and maybe Mitchell had been reading the same articles, because before I can begin to think how to try and track him down, he calls me.

I drive past the place I'm to meet Mitchell and have to double back, squinting in the glare of the big rigs that roar out of the darkness, all strung up with fairylights like the spaceship in *Closer Encounters.* I do what sounds like serious damage to the underside of the rental when I finally pull off.

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The ruins are close to the highway, but there's a spooky feeling that makes me leave the car's headlights on. Out across the dark desert basin, where the runways of Edwards Air Force Base are outlined in patterns of red and green lights a dozen miles long, some big engine makes a long drawn-out rumble that rises to a howl before cutting off.

I sit in the car and take a few pulls on my bottle to get some courage, or at least burn away the fluttering in my gut, looking at the arthritic shapes that Joshua trees make in the car headlights. Then I make myself get out and look around. There's not much to the ruins, just a chimney stack and a line of pillars where maybe a porch stood. People camping out have left circles of ash in the sand and dented cans scattered around; when I stumble over a can and it rattles off a stone, I realize how quiet the desert is, beyond the noise of the trucks on the highway. I get a feeling like the one I had when the three of us were waiting that last night, before we blew up the mothership, and have to take another inch off the level of the tequila to calm down.

That's when my rental car headlights go out and I almost lose it, because that's what happened when they tried to kidnap me, the lights and then the dashboard on my pickup going out and then a bright light all around, coming from above. That time, I had a pump-action shotgun on the rack in the cab, which is what saved me. Now, I have a tequila bottle with a couple of inches sloshing in it, and a rock I pick up.

A voice behind me says my name, and I spin and lose my balance and fall on my ass, the tequila bottle emptying over my pants leg. A flashlight beam pins me, and behind it, Elliot Mitchell says, "This was the last socialist republic in the USA, did you know that? They called the place Llano del Rio. This was their meeting hall. They built houses, a school, planted orchards. But the government gave their water rights to the local farmers and they had to move out. All that's left are the orchards, and those will go because they're subdividing the desert for housing tracts to take LA's overspill."

I squint into the light, but can't see anything of the man holding it.

"Never put your faith in government, Ray. Its first instinct is not to protect the people it's supposed to serve but to protect its own self. People elect politicians, not governments. Don't get up. I'm happier to see you sitting down. Do you think you were followed here?"

"Why would I be followed? No one cares about it anymore. That's why I'm here."

"You want to make another movie, Ray? Who is it with? Oliver Stone? He came out to see me. Or sent one of his researchers anyway. You know his father was in the Navy, don't you, and he's funded by the UN counterpropaganda unit, the same one that tried to assassinate Reagan. The question is, who's paying you?"

"Crazy Sam's Hardware back in Brooklyn, if I do the ad."

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I have a bad feeling. Mitchell appears to have joined the right-wing nuts who believe that little black helicopters follow them everywhere, and that there are secret codes on the back of traffic signs to direct the UN invasion force when it comes.

I say, "I don't have any interest except the same one that made you want to call me. We saved the world, Elliot, and they're ripping off our story . . ."

"You let them. You and Nyquist. How *is* old Nyquist?"

"Sitting in a room with mattresses on the walls, wearing a backward jacket and eating cold creamed corn. They made him the hero, when it was *us* who blew up the mothership, it was *us* who captured that stinking silver beachball, it was *us* who worked out how to poison most of them."

I put the bottle to my lips, but there's hardly a swallow left. I toss it away. This isn't going the way I planned, but I'm caught up in my anger. It's come right back, dull and heavy. "We're the ones that saved Susan, not her lousy husband!"

"We didn't save her, Ray. That was in your TV movie, *The Omega Encounter*. We got her back, but the things they'd put inside her killed her anyway."

"Well, we got her back, and if fuckin' Doc Jensen had listened, we *would* have saved her, too!"

I sit there, looking into the flashlight beam with drunken tears running down my face.

"How much do you remember, Ray? Not the movies, but the *real thing?* Do you remember how we got Susan out of the mothership?"

"I stay away from shopping malls, because they give me flashbacks. Maybe I'm as crazy as Nyquist. Sometimes, I dream I'm in one of those old-fashioned hedge mazes, like in *The Shining*. Sometimes, I'm trying to get out of the hospital they put us in afterward. But it's always the same, you know."

Mitchell switches off the flashlight. I squint into the darkness, but all I see is swimming afterimages.

"Come tomorrow," Mitchell says, and something thumps beside me.

It is a rock, with a piece of torn paper tied to it. Under the dome light of the rental car, I smooth out the paper and try to make sense of the map Mitchell has drawn.

Two days. That's how long it took. Now, my life is split into Before and After. What no one gets is that the thing itself—the event, the encounter, the invasion, the incursion, the whatever—was over inside two days. I've had head colds and belly-aches that lasted a whole lot longer. That's what marks me out. When I die, my obits will consist of three paragraphs about those two days and two sentences about everything else. Like I

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said about Jan-Michael, I have a post-birth, pre-death rut for a life. Except for those two days.

After about a decade, it got real old. It was as if everyone was quizzing me about some backyard baseball game I pitched in when I was a kid, blotting out all of the rest of my life—parents, job, marriages, kid, love, despair—with a couple of hours on the mound. I even tried clamming up, refusing to go through it all again for the anniversary features. I turned my back on those two days and tried to fix on something else worth talking about. I'd come close to making it with Adrienne Barbeau, didn't I? Or was it Heather Locklear? Maybe it was just in one of the scripts and some actor played me. I was doing harder stuff than alcohol just then.

That phase lasted maybe three months. I was worn down in the end. I realized that I *needed* to tell it again. For me, as much as for everyone else. I was like those talking books in that Bradbury novel—yeah, I admit it, I read science fiction when I was a kid, and doesn't *that* blow my whole story to bits, proving that I made it all up out of half-remembered bits of pulp magazine stories—my whole life was validated by my story, and telling it was as necessary to me as breathing. Over the years, it got polished and shiny. More than a few folks told me it sounded like Bradbury.

"A million years ago, Nyquist's farm was the bottom of the ocean," I would always begin, paraphrasing the opening of my book. "Susan Nyquist collected sea-shells in the desert. Just before I looked up and saw the spinning shape in the sky, I was sifting through the soft white sand, dredging up a clam-shaped rock that might once have been alive . . ."

No, I'm not going to tell it all again here. That's not what this is about at all.

Do you know what a palimpsest is? It's old parchment that has been written on once, had the writing rubbed out, and been written on again. Sometimes several times. Only, with modern techniques, scientists can read the original writing, looking underneath the layers.

That's my story. Each time I've told it, I've whited out the version underneath. It's built up, like lime on a dripping faucet. In telling it so many times, I've buried the actual thing.

Maybe that's why I've done it.

Regardless of the movies, it wasn't a B picture, with simple characters and actions. Okay, there were aliens (everyone else calls them that except Strieber, so I guess I can too), a woman was taken, and we poisoned most of them and dug out dynamite and blew up their spaceship (I've never liked calling it that—it was more like one of Susan's shells blown up like a balloon, only with light instead of helium or air). We saved the world, right?

Or maybe we just killed a bunch of unknowable Gandhis from the Beyond. That's what some woman accused me of at a book-signing. She

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thought they'd come to save us, and that we'd doomed the world by scaring them off.

That gave me a shock. I tried to see the story the way she might.

It didn't play in Peoria. The woman—pink bib overalls, bird's-nest hair, Velma-from-*Scooby-Doo* glasses, a "Frodo Lives!" badge—hadn't seen the visitors, the aliens.

She hadn't seen what they'd done to Susan.

But I was up close.

The little fuckers were evil. No, make that Evil. I don't know if they were from outer space, the third circle of Hell, or the Land of Nod, but they weren't here to help anyone but themselves.

What they did to the cattle, what they did to Susan, wasn't science, wasn't curiosity. They *liked* taking things apart, the way Mikey Bignell in third grade liked setting fire to cats, and Mikey grew up to get shot dead while pistol-whipping a fifty-two-year-old married lady during a filling station hold-up. If the visitors ever grow up beyond the cat-burning phase, I figure they could do some serious damage.

I am not just trying to justify what we did to them.

Now, without trying to tell the story yet again, I'm tapping into what I really felt at the time: half-scared, half-enraged. No Spielberg sense of wonder. No TV movie courage. No Ray Bradbury wistfulness.

"Inside the Ship was all corridors and no rooms, criss-crossing tunnels through what seemed like a rocky rubber solid stuff. Mitchell went ahead, and I followed. We blundered any which way, down passages that made us bend double and kink our knees, and trusted to luck that we'd find where they'd taken Susan. I don't know whether or not we were lucky to find her or whether they intended it. I don't know if we were brave and lucky, or dumb rats in a maze.

"Mitchell claims the thing told us where to go, flashed a floor-plan into our minds, like the escape lights in an airliner. I guess that's his scientific mind talking. For me, it was different. I had a sense of being myself and being above myself, looking down. We didn't take a direct route to Susan, but spiraled around her, describing a mandala with an uneven number of planes of symmetry. It was like the New Math: finding the answer wasn't as important as knowing how to get there, and I think Mitchell and I, in our different ways, both flunked."

I didn't say so in the book, but I think that's why what happened to Susan afterward went down. When we dragged Susan, alive but unconscious, out of the hot red-black half-dark at the heart of the ship we were too exhausted to feel any sense of triumph. We went in, we found her, we got her out. But we didn't get the trick quite right.

Here's how I usually end it:

"Nyquist was shaking too bad to aim the rifle. I don't amount to much, but while I can't shoot good enough to take the eye out of the eagle if you

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toss a silver dollar in the air, nine times out of ten I'll at least clip the coin. Mitchell was shouting as he ran toward us with two of the things hopping after him. The reel of wire was spinning in his hands as he ran. Nyquist snapped out of it and tossed me the gun"—in his version, he gets both of the critters with two shots, bing-bang—"and I drew a bead, worried that Mitchell would zigzag into the line of fire, then put a bullet into the first alien. Pink stuff burst out of the back of it in midleap, and it tumbled over, deflating like a pricked party balloon.

"Even from where I was, I could smell the stink, and Nyquist started to throw up. The second critter was almost on Mitchell when I fired again, the hot casing stinging my cheek as I worked the bolt, and fired, and fired, and kept shooting as Mitchell threw himself down in a tangle of wire while the thing went scooting off back toward the ship. My hands shaking so bad I sliced my hand bad when I trimmed the wires back to bare copper. Mitchell snatched them from me and touched them to the terminals of the truck's battery.

"We didn't have more than a dozen sticks of low-grade dynamite for getting out tree stumps, and Mitchell hadn't had time to place them carefully when those things came scooting out like hornets out of a bottle. And Mitchell hadn't even wanted to do it, saying that the ship must be fireproofed, like the Apollo module, or it wouldn't have survived atmospheric entry. But it was our last best hope, and when the sticks blew, the ship went up like a huge magnesium flare. I put my hands over my eyes, and saw the bones of my hands against the light. The burst was etched into my eyeballs for months. It hardly left any debris, just evaporated into burning light, blasting the rock beneath to black crystal. You can still see the glassy splash where it stood if you can get the security clearance. There was a scream like a dying beast, but it was all over quickly. When we stopped blinking and the echo was dead, there was almost nothing where the ship had been. They were gone."

Is that an ending? If it is, what has the *rest* of my life been? An epilogue, like on some Quinn Martin series episode, with William Conrad reporting that I am still at large, still running off my mouth, still living it down?

Or has it just been an interlude before the sequel?

I wake up the next morning with the shakes. There's not even fumes in the tequila bottle I clutched to my chest all night, and nothing but warm cans of Dr Pepper in the motel vending machine, so I drive the mile into town and buy a twelve pack of Bud, giving thanks to California's liberal liquor-license laws. I'm coming out of the 7 Eleven when two men in sunglasses fall in step with me on either side, and I don't need to see their badges to know what they are.

They make me leave my beer in the car and take me across the dusty

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highway to the town's diner, an Airstream trailer with a tattered awning shading one side. The older guy orders coffee and pancakes, and grins across the table while his partner crowds me on the bench. I can't help looking through the greasy window at my car, where the beer is heating up on the front seat, and the older guy's grin gets wider. He gets out a hip flask and pours a shot into my coffee, and I can't help myself and guzzle it down, scalding coffee running down my chin.

"Jesus," the young guy, Duane Bissette, says, disgusted. He's the local field agent, blond hair slicked back from his rawboned face. He hasn't taken off his mirrorshades, and a shoulder harness makes a bulge under his tailored suit jacket.

"Judge not," the other guy says, and pours me another shot, twinkling affably. He has curly white hair and a comfortable gut, like Santa Claus's younger brother. He's hung his seersucker jacket on the back of his chair. There are half-moon sweat stains under his arms, and sweat beads under his hairline. "Ray's living out his past, and he's having a hard time with it. Am I right, or am I right?"

I ignore the rye whiskey in the coffee mug. I say, "If you want to talk to me, talk to my agent first. Murray Weiss, he's in the Manhattan Directory."

"But you're one of us," the older guy says, widening his eyes in mock innocence. "You got your badge, when? '77? '78?"

It was 1976 and I'm sure he damn well knows it, done right out on the White House lawn, with a silver band playing and the Stars and Stripes snapping in the breeze under a hot white sky. The Congressional Medal of Honor for me and Nyquist, and honorary membership in the FBI. I'd asked for that because if it was good enough for Elvis, it was good enough for me. It was the last time I saw Nyquist, and even then he was ignoring me with the same intensity with which I'm right now ignoring that rye.

I say, "Your young friend here was polite enough to show me his badge. I don't believe I know you."

"Oh, we met, very briefly. I was part of the team that helped clean up." He smiles and holds out his hand over the coffee mugs and plates of pancakes, then shrugs. "Guerdon Winter. I'll never forget that first sight of the crater, and the carcass you had."

"You were all wearing those spacesuits and helmets. 'Scuse me for not recognizing you."

The FBI agents looked more like space aliens than the things we killed. They cleared out everything, from the scanty remains of the mothership to my collection of tattered paperbacks. I still have the receipts. They took me and Nyquist and Mitchell and put us in isolation chambers somewhere in New Mexico and put us through thirty days of interrogation and medical tests. They took Susan's body and we never saw it again. I think of the C-130 crash, and I say, "You should have taken more care of what you appropriated, Agent Winter."

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Guerdon Winter takes a bite of pancake.

"We could have had that alien carcass stuffed and mounted and put on display in the Smithsonian, and in five years it would have become one more exhibit worth maybe ten seconds' gawping. The public doesn't need any help in getting distracted, and everything gets old fast. You know better than me how quickly they forget. You're the one in showbiz. But *we* haven't forgotten, Ray."

"You want me to find out what Mitchell is doing."

"Mitchell phoned you from a pay phone right here in town ten days ago, and you wrote him at the box number he gave you, and then you came down here. You saw him last night."

Duane Bissette stirs and says, "He's been holed up for two years now. He's been carrying out illegal experiments."

"If you were following me you could have arrested him last night."

Guerdon Winter looks at Duane Bissette, then looks at me. He says, "We could arrest him each time he comes into town for supplies, but that wouldn't help us get into his place, and we know enough about his interrogation profile to know he wouldn't give it up to us. But he wants to talk to *you,* Ray. We just want to know what it is he's doing out there."

"He believes you have the map," Duane Bissette says.

I remember the scrap of paper Mitchell gave me last night and say, "You want the map?"

"It isn't important," Guerdon Winter says quickly. "What's important is that you're here, Ray."

I look out at my rental car again, still thinking about the beer getting warm. Just beyond it, a couple of Mexicans in wide-brimmed straw hats are offloading watermelons from a dusty Toyota pickup. One is wearing a very white T-shirt with the Green Lantern symbol. They could be agents, too; so could the old galoot at the motel.

I know Duane Bissette was in my motel room last night; I know he took Mitchell's map and photocopied it and put it back. The thing is, it doesn't seem like betrayal. It stirs something inside me, not like the old excitement of those two crystal-clear days when everything we did was a heroic gesture, nothing like so strong or vivid, but alive all the same. Like waking up to a perfect summer's day after a long uneasy sleep full of nightmares.

I push the coffee away from me and say, "What kind of illegal experiments?"

If Mitchell hadn't been a government employee, if they hadn't ridiculed and debunked his theories, and spirited him off to the ass end of nowhere—no Congressional Medal ceremony for him, he got his by registered mail—if they hadn't stolen the discovery of Mitchellite from him, then maybe he wouldn't have ended up madder than a dancing chicken

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on a hot plate at the state fair. Maybe he wouldn't have taken it into his head to try what he did. Or maybe he would have done it anyway. Like me, he was living in After, with those two bright days receding like a train. Like me, he wanted them back. Unlike me, he thought he had a way to do it.

Those two agents don't tell me as much as I need to know, but I suspect that they don't know what it is Mitchell is doing. I have an idea that he's building something out in the desert that'll bring those old times back again.

Driving out to Mitchell's place takes a couple of hours. The route on the map he gave me is easy enough: south along Pearblossom's two-lane blacktop, then over the concrete channel of the aqueduct that carries water taken from Washington State—did you see *Chinatown?* yeah, there—and up an unmade track that zigzags along the contours of the Piñon Hills and into a wide draw that runs back a couple of miles. The light in the draw is odd. Cold and purple, like expensive sunglasses. Either side of the road is nothing but rocks, sand, dry scrub, and scattered Joshua trees.

I start to feel a grudging sympathy for Agent Bissette. No matter how he hangs back, it's impossible to tail a car out here without your mark knowing. I have the urge to wait for a dip that puts me momentarily out of his sight and swerve off into a patch of soft sand, sinking the rental like a boat in shallows, creating another unexplained mystery.

Mitchell's place is right at the top of the draw, near the beginning of the tree line. In the high desert, trees grow only on the tops of the mountains. The FBI parks under a clump of stunted pines and lets me go on alone. I'm lucky they didn't want me to wear a wire. They'll just wait, and see if I can cope with Crazy Elliot. For them, it'll be a boring afternoon, with maybe an exciting apprehension about nightfall.

Me, I'm going back to the Days of Sharp Focus.

The rye in the coffee has burned out and I've not touched the soup-warm beer on the passenger seat. I can feel the heat steaming the booze out of my brain. I'm going into this alone.

I get out of the rental, aware of Winter and Bissette watching me through the tinted windshield of their Lincoln Continental. Of Mitchell, there's not a trace. Not even footprints or tire marks in the sandy track. I crouch down, and run a handful of warm sand through my fingers, making like an Indian tracker in some old Western while I ponder my next move.

There are tine-trails in the sand. The whole area has been raked, like a Japanese garden. I can imagine Mitchell working by night, raking a fan-shaped wake as he backs toward the paved area I see a dozen yards away.

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I walk across the sand, and reach the flagstones. This was the floor of a house that's long gone. I can see the fieldstone hearth, and the ruts where wooden walls had been.

Beyond the stone is a gentle incline, sloping down maybe twenty feet, then leveling off. Down there, protected from sight, Mitchell has been building. I look at his paper, and see what he means. The FBI think it's a circuit diagram, but it really *is* a map. Mitchell has made himself a maze, but there's nothing on his map that shows me how to get through it.

I know now where the old timbers of the house have gone. Mitchell has cannibalized everything carriable within a mile, and some things I would have sworn you'd need a bulldozer at least to shift, but he must have had a few truckloads of chickenwire, wood, and just plain junk hauled out here. The archway entrance is a Stonehenge arrangement of two 1950s junkers buried hood-first like standing stones, with their tailfins and clusters of egg-shaped rear lights projecting into the air. A crosspiece made of three supermarket shopping carts completes the arch.

There are other old cars parked and piled in a curving outer wall, built on with wire and wood. And all over the place, sticking up through the sand, are sharp spars and spines that sparkle in the sun.

I know that glittery look, a glinting like the facets of an insect's eye or 1970s eye makeup under fluorescent disco lights. It's Mitchellite.

I walk up to the gateway and stop, careful not to touch the spars. They dot everything—stone, wood, metal—like some sort of mineral mold. Crusty little alien points that seem to be growing out of the ordinary Earth stuff. About ten years ago, a couple of crazy English physicists claimed you could use Mitchellite to get unlimited energy by cold fusion and end up with more Mitchellite than you started with, but they were debunked, defrocked, and for all I know defenestrated, and that was the end of it. But maybe they were right. It looks like the Mitchellite is transmuting ordinary stuff into itself.

There's an iron crowbar, untouched by Mitchellite, propped against a stone. I pick it up, heft it in my hands. It has a good weight. I always felt better with a simple tool, something you could trust.

Planks are set between the half-buried cars, a path into the interior of the maze. They are pocked with Mitchellite spars that splinter the rotten wood from the inside. I smash down with the poker and split a plank, scraping away bone-dry wood fragments from the Mitchellite nerve-tangles that have been growing inside, sucking strength from the material.

It looks fragile, but it doesn't crumple under my boots.

On the other side of the arch hangs a shower curtain that leaves a three-foot gap beneath it. I push it aside with the crowbar and step into the maze.

The structure is open to the sky, mostly. The walls are of every kind of

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junk, wood, lines of rocks or unmortared concrete blocks, even barbed wire, grown through or studded with Mitchellite. A few yuccas rise up from the maze's low walls, their fleshy leaves sparkling as if dusted with purplish snow. The floor is made of Mitchellite-eaten planks. There are stretches of clean, unmarked sand. But by each of them is propped a rake, for obscuring footprints. By the first rake is a pane of glass in the sand, and in the hollow under the glass is a handgun wrapped in a plastic baggie, and a handwritten note. *In case of F(B)IRE smash glass.* So that's what the crowbar is for. I leave the gun where it is and turn and stare at the maze again.

After a while I fish out the map and look at it. It takes me a while even to work out where I am, but with a creepy chill I realize I'm standing on the spot where Mitchell has drawn a stick figure. In the center of the map is a white space, where there's another, bigger stick figure. Dotted throughout are smaller figures, drawn in red. I know what they're supposed to be. Some are drawn over black lines that represent walls.

I call out Mitchell's name.

The maze funnels my own voice back to me, distorted and empty.

"Ray, come on, what are you waiting for?"

It was obviously a doorway. Mitchell bent down low—the round opening was the creatures' size—and squeezed into the ship.

I hesitated, but thought of Susan, and the things that had taken her.

"I'm coming, Mitchell."

I followed the geologist. Inside, was another world.

"I'm coming, Mitchell."

I know at once what he's done. This isn't really a maze. It's a model, twice as big again as the real thing, of the aliens' ship.

My knees are weak and I'm shaking. I'm back on the mandala path. I'm above myself and in myself, and I know where to go. I know the route, just as I know the ache that sets into my knees after a minute, an ache that grows to a crippling pain. Just as I remember finding Susan. And finding out later what they'd done to her.

Mitchell took the lead, that time. I followed, forgetting Nyquist chicken-heartedly frozen at the entrance, not daring to go further.

Remembering, I follow Mitchell's lead again. Around and inward, a spiral across a DNA coil or a wiring diagram, a bee-dance through catacombs. The route is a part of me.

The deeper inside the maze I get, the more Mitchellite there is. The original wood and stone and wire and concrete has been almost completely eaten away. Purple light glitters everywhere, dazzling even through my sunglasses. Without them, I'd be snow-blind in a minute.

When the process is finished, when there's nothing more of Earth in

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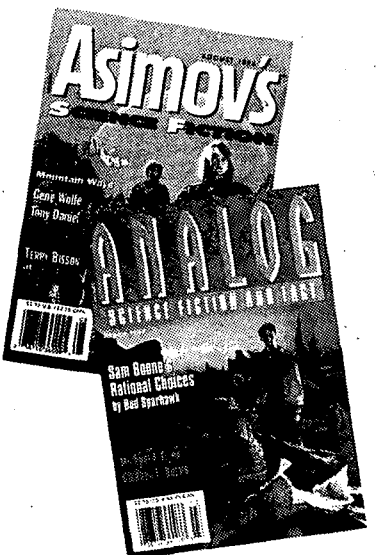

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the maze, will this thing be able to fly? Will Mitchell carry the war to the enemy?

"Ray," someone—not Mitchell—shouts, from behind me.

It's the FBI. I thought I was supposed to haul Mitchell out on my own. Now the pros are here, I wonder why I've bothered.

I feel like a sheep driven across a minefield. A Judas goat.

I got into the maze and I'm still alive, so Guerdon Winter and Bissette know it's safe.

I turn, shading my eyes against the tinted glare that shines up from everything around me. The agents are following my footprints. Bissette doesn't duck under the crossbar of an arch nailed up of silvery grey scraps of wood, and scrapes his forehead against a Mitchellite-spackled plank.

I know what will happen.

It's like sandpaper stuck with a million tiny fishhooks and razorblades. The gentlest touch opens deep gashes. Bissette swears, not realizing how badly he's hurt, and a curtain of blood bursts from the side of his head. A flap of scalp hangs down. Red rain spatters his shades.

Bissette falls to his knees. Guerdon Winter plucks out a handkerchief from the breast pocket of his sweat-stained seersucker jacket. A bedsheet won't staunch the flow.

"You can't go on," Guerdon Winter tells the junior agent, who can't protest for the pain. "We'll come back for you."

Naturally, Guerdon Winter has his gun out. When Mitchell and I went into the mothership, we didn't even think of guns. I left my shotgun in the pickup, and Nyquist held on to his rifle like it was a comforter blanket and wouldn't give it up to us. Some heroes, huh? Every single version of the story rectifies the omission, and we go in tooled up fit to face Bonnie and Clyde.

The FBI has made a bad mistake.

They've changed the story again. By adding the guns, and maybe themselves, they've made me lose my place.

I don't know which way to go from here.

My feet and my spine and my aching knees were remembering. But the memory's been wiped.

Bissette is groaning. His wound is tearing worse—there are tiny particles of alien matter in it, ripping his skin apart as they grow—and the whole right side of his head and his suit-shoulder are deep crimson.

"Ray," prompts Guerdon Winter. There's a note of pleading in his voice.

I look at the fork ahead of us, marked with a cow's skull nodding on a pole, and suddenly have no idea which path to take. I look up at the sky. There's a canopy of polythene up there, scummy with sand-drifts in the folds. I look at the aisles of junk. They mean nothing to me. I'm as blank as the middle of the map Mitchell gave me.

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Then Winter does something incredibly stupid. He offers me a hipflask and smiles and says, "Loosen up, Ray. You'll do fine."

I knock the flask away, and it hits a concrete pillar laced with Mitchellite and sticks there, leaking amber booze from a dozen puncture points. The smell does something to my hindbrain and I start to run, filled with blind panic just the way I was when I followed behind Mitchell, convinced alien blimps would start nibbling at my feet.

I run and run, turning left, turning right, deeper and deeper into the maze. The body remembers, if it's allowed. Someone shouts behind me, and then there's a shot and a bullet spangs off an engine block and whoops away into the air; another turns the windshield of a wheelless truck to lace which holds its shape for a moment before falling away. I leap over a spar of Mitchellite like an antelope and run on, feeling the years fall away. I've dropped the map, but it doesn't matter. The body remembers. Going in, and coming out. Coming out with Susan. That's the name I yell, but ahead, through a kind of hedge of twisted wire coated with a sheen of Mitchellite, through the purple glare and a singing in my ears, I see Mitchell himself, standing in the doorway of a kind of bunker.

He's older than I remember or imagined, the Boy Scout look transmuted into a scrawny geezer wearing only ragged oil-stained shorts, desert boots, and wraparound shades, his skin tanned a mahogany brown. I lean on the crowbar, taking great gulps of air as I try and get my breath back, and he looks at me calmly. There's a pump-action Mossbauer shotgun leaning on the wall beside him.

At last, I can say, "This is some place you got here, Elliot. Where did you get all the stuff?"

"It's a garden," Mitchell says, and picks up the shotgun and walks off around the bunker. He has half-healed scars on his back. Maybe he brushed a little too close to something in his maze.

I follow. The bunker is a poured concrete shell, a low round dome like a turtle shell half-buried in the dry desert dirt. There's a battered Blazer parked at the back, and a little Honda generator and a TV satellite dish. A ramp of earth leads up to the top of the bunker, and we climb up there and stand side by side, looking out over the maze. It extends all around the bunker. The sun is burning over our shoulders, and the concentric spirals of encrusted junk shimmer and glitter, taking the light and making it into something else, a purple haze that glistens in the air, obscuring more than it reveals.

"How long have you been doing this, Elliot? It looks like you've been here years."

Elliot Mitchell says, "You ever been to South America, Ray? You should have. They're very big on flying saucers in South America. Out in Peru,

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there are patterns of stones in the deserts that only make sense from the air. Like landing strips, parking aprons."

A chill grips me. "You're building a spaceport?"

"We never had any evidence that they came from outer space," Mitchell says.

"What are you saying, they're from *Peru*? There's some bad shit on Earth, but nothing like those things. What are you doing here, Elliot? Trying to turn yourself into one of them? Listen, if you've found anything out, it'll mean a shitload of attention. That's what I . . ."

"More talk shows, Ray? More ten-line fillers in *Time*? I had some guy from the *National Enquirer* come by a month or so ago. He tried to get in. Maybe he's still in here, somewhere."

I remember the red marks on Mitchell's map, in the otherwise blank space of the maze.

I say, "You let me in, Elliot."

"You understand, Ray. You were *there*, with me. You know what it was like. Only you and me really know what it was like."

I see why he wants me here. Mitchell has built this for a purpose, and I'm supposed to tell the world what that is. I say, "What are you planning, Elliot? What are you going to do with all this?"

Mitchell giggles. "I don't control it, Ray. Not anymore. It's more and more difficult to get out each time. When we went to get Susan, where did we go?"

He's setting me up for something. I say dumbly, "Into the ship. That's how I knew to get to you here. This is like the ship."

"It's how I started it out. But it's been *growing*. Started with a bare ounce of Mitchellite, grew this garden over the template I made. Now it grows itself. Like the ship. We went in, and we went somewhere else. Not all the way, because it hadn't finished growing, but a good way. Back toward where they came from. Wherever it was."

"You're saying the ship didn't come from Outer Space?"

"It *grew* here. Like this." Mitchell makes a sweeping gesture with the shotgun, including everything around him. He's King of the Hill. "Once a critical density had been reached, the gateway would have opened, and they would have come through."

"They *did* come through. We poisoned them, we shot them, we blew up their fucking ship—"

"Mitchellite is strange stuff, Ray. Strange matter. It shouldn't exist, not in our universe, at least. It's a mixture of elements all with atomic weights more than ten times that of uranium. It shouldn't even get together in the first place without tremendous energies forcing the quarks together, and it should fly apart in a picosecond after its creation. But it doesn't. It's metastable. It makes holes in reality, increases quantum tunneling so that things can leak through from one universe to another.

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That's how they probed us. Sent a probe through on the atomic scale and let it grow. Maybe they sent millions of probes, and only one hit the right configuration. Before we sent up astronauts, we sent up chimps and dogs. That's what they did. They sent through seeds of the things we saw, and they lodged and grew."

"In the cows."

Great chunks had been ripped out of the cows I found. Nyquist thought it was chainsaw butchers, until I dug around and found the blisters inside the meat. Like tapeworm cysts. And Susan, Susan, when we got her out . . . .

"In the cows," Mitchell says. "That was the first stage. And then they took Susan. That was the second stage, Ray. First chimps, then the astronauts. But we stopped it."

"Yeah. We stopped it."

Mitchell doesn't hear me. He's caught up in his own story.

He says, "They gave the first *astronauts* ticker-tape parades down Wall Street, but what happened to the chimps? First time around they picked us up and husked us of our stories and forgot us. *Second* time is the ticker-tape parade."

Susan never came around. That was a blessing at least. Doc Jensen wouldn't believe me when I told him that I figured what had happened to the cattle was happening to her. Not until that night, when the things started moving under her skin. He tried to cut them out then, but they were all *through* her. So I did the right thing. Doc Jensen couldn't, even though he saw what was inside her. He'd still stuck with his oath, even though he had a bottle of whiskey inside him. So I did what had to be done, and then we went out and blew up the ship.

Mitchell tells me, "You have to believe it, Ray. *This* time they won't forget us. This time we'll control it. They tried to discredit me. They stole my records, they said I was as crazy as Nyquist and tried to section me, they made up stories about finding terrestrial deposits of Mitchellite. Well, maybe those were real. Maybe those were from previous attempts. It's a matter of configuration."

He gestures with the shotgun again, and that's when I cold-cock him.

He thought I'd be on his side. He thought I wanted nothing more than fame, than to get back the feeling we had in those two days. He was right. I did. His mistake was that he thought I'd pay *any* price. And forgetting to put on a shirt.

The crowbar bounces off his skull, and he falls like an unstrung puppet. I kick the shotgun off the domed roof and then he looks up at me and

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I see what he's done to himself. The sunglasses have come off, and his left eye is a purple mandala.

When I finish, there isn't much left of the top of his head. In amongst the blood and brains: glittering purple-sheened strands, like cords of fungus through rotten wood. A couple of the things inside him try to get out through the scars on his back, but I squash them back into Mitchell's flesh.

After I kill Mitchell, I take the gasoline from his generator and burn the dome without looking to see what's inside it, and smash as much of the whole center of the maze as I can. I work in a kind of cold fury, choking in the black smoke pouring out of the dome, until I can hardly stand. Then I toss the crowbar into the flames and walk out of there.

There's no sign of the FBI agents, although their car is still there when I get out. Winter and Bissette are still back there, incorporated. I hope to God they're dead, although it isn't likely. But the maze has stopped growing, I know that. The light's gone from it. There's a cell phone in the glove compartment, and I use the redial button and tell the guy on the other end that Winter and Bissette are lost, that the whole place has to be destroyed.

"Don't go in there to look for them. Burn it from the air, it would give them a kindlier death. Burn it down and blow it up. Do the right thing. I made a start. They won't come back."

When I say it, for the first time, it sounds finished. ●

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CURSE OF MEDUSA'S HUSBAND

He lines their bedroom
with mirrors and their sex
becomes a multiple dance
he can observe from
every imaginable angle
except the direct one.

Cowering beneath
her writhing coiffure,
viewing their reflection
reflected to infinity,
she begins to question
the course of his passion.
He begins to suspect
in their group effect
his mirrors have become
more than mere glass
patinaed with silver,
that trapped among

spying and spied upon
visage he has become
no more than image:
some other prime lover
rules these corridors
of rebounding light.

Despite his specular
precautions and evasions,
each and every night
she continues to prevail.
Never once does she fail
to turn him to stone.

—Bruce Boston

Illustration by Shirley Chan

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Deborah Wheeler

MOTHER AFRICA

The author began "writing stories in the fourth grade, some time around the Mesozoic Era, and kept on writing through degrees in biology (BA, Reed College) and psychology (MS, Portland State University), and work as a bacteriologist, a librarian, and a preschool gym teacher. In between two children, a black belt in kung fu, and a chiropractic career, I've sold two science fiction novels and three dozen short stories. My two novels from DAW are *Jaydium* and *Northlight*." Her most recent sales include stories to *F&SF, Realms of Fantasy, Sisters of the Night, Ancient Enchantresses,* and *Tales from Jabba's Palace*. "Mother Africa" is her first tale for *Asimov's*.

All the long flight across the Atlantic, Willamette McCoy stared into the night, watching for the first hint of brightness in the east. When at last the Kampala runway stretched before her, a lacework of cracked cement, her heart sank. Africa didn't look anything like the Promised Land.

The touchdown nearly jarred her teeth out of her head. From the airport, she rode with her family in an old cattle truck labeled, "Villages Reclamation Project." The truck stank of manure, and the slatted sides were chewed and splintered. After a few minutes, Willamette's chest went all tight and wheezy from breathing the dust-hazy air.

They waded through the city, the families assigned to each village project keeping together. There were people everywhere, people the color of

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her African dreams. They shuffled along the sidewalks and squatted in front of baskets of chili peppers, mango, millet, and sorghum.

The streets teemed with battered cars and trucks, hand-pulled carts, scrawny buffalo, donkeys, even a camel. Barefoot children shrieked and scampered between men bent under stalks of bananas or crates of live chickens, women with sacks balanced serenely on their heads. Willamette's ears filled with the sound of radio music shrilling from opened doorways, horns blaring, peddlers calling out their wares. Back in Troit, there had been gunfire and sirens, too, but always on the other side of the razor-wire fences. She'd lived all her thirteen years with those sounds.

A boy not too much older than Willamette slouched on the dirt, his back to the wall of their hotel, stick-thin legs outstretched. One hand lay palm up on his lap, as if begging. Flies clustered around his eyes and the open sores on his ankles. Willamette thought he was dead until she saw the pulse in his neck.

"What's wrong with him?" she asked Mama.

"Slim disease."

Everything had a different name here. Willamette heard Dad say that AIDS was the reason they'd been able to sign up for a farm. The old tribal villages were gone and everyone who wasn't sick had left for Kampala or Mbale to find work.

"Why doesn't someone take care of him?" Willamette asked.

Mama's mouth went tight. "He's probably here alone, with no family."

A man lounging beside the hotel doorway said, "All the people from the southern district are gone. Dead, or back to the quarantine areas." The way he said it, there wasn't much difference.

When her brother Stephen bent over to speak to the boy, there was no response. The man at the doorway spat out a wad of something green and disgusting and asked, in sing-song English, how much Stephen wanted for his sister. He didn't mean slavery, but bride wealth, gifts from the groom to the bride's family—so many cattle, so many vials of AZT—or at least that's what Willamette hoped he meant. She'd studied such customs in the Reclamation Project classes.

The hotel room was a dark, stuffy, peeling cell. Out of the corner of her eye, Willamette caught bedbugs crawling across the single lumpy mattress she shared with Mama. Because Mama was afraid to let them drink the water, all they had were warm Cokes, so old they'd lost their fizz. On the other side of the wall, a baby cried fitfully.

The next morning, all the families assigned to their village crowded into the dingy hotel lobby for the ceremony that would transfer the official land-use right to them. The Reclamation Project agent said they all had to be there. Packed in between her oldest brother Joseph, who was

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six feet one, and a lady from Pitts who smelled of garlic and was bigger than two of Mama, Willamette couldn't see much. The baby who'd cried all night curled on his daddy's shoulder, snuffling and whimpering.

Three old men, bent over and scrawny in their bright-colored robes, tottered to the center of the circle. One carried a pile of battered school notebooks. These were the village registers, records of every birth, marriage, death. In voices so softly musical that Willamette could hardly hear them, the elders described the history of the village, the places to be respected. Then Dad went up with the other grown men to receive the registers. Through the press of bodies, Willamette caught a glimpse of a dark, wrinkled face, eyes lingering for a last moment on the old notebooks.

"It is good that there will be children in the village again," the elder said.

After the ceremony, the Reclamation Project lady said everyone must be ready to leave first thing in the morning. Willamette didn't catch all the details, but it had something to do with clan fighting in another part of the city.

"It is the same old story," the Project lady said, "each group blaming the other for slim disease. First it was prostitutes, then truckers, then anyone from the south or the west. You are Americans, you have nothing to do with these troubles. But still, it is not safe to stay long in the city."

Back in the room, Willamette lay on the bed beside Mama. Her mouth tasted of metal. The dust had worked its way into her lungs. She used her inhaler twice, more than she was supposed to, and it left her too jittery to sleep. She couldn't think straight, she only knew she didn't want to wake Mama up. The walls seemed to press in on her, smothering her.

Out in the city, she heard gunfire, but maybe she was dreaming being back in Troit. Then a big boom, like a bomb or a gasoline tank exploding. There had been plenty of those back home. She knew the sounds by heart.

Now she was really scared. She tried to call out, but she couldn't get enough air to make a sound. She shook all over. Something hot and silvery clawed at the back of her throat.

Mama woke up. She knew something was wrong, the way she always did. She got Willamette calmed down and put a damp washcloth across her eyes. Willamette drifted back to sleep in the close hot darkness, knowing that Mama would take care of everything.

The next morning, Dad told her the news. The ruckus last night was a gunfight over by the lot where the Reclamation vehicles were parked. Some of the guards belonged to one clan, the raiders to another. The big noise was two of the crawlers being blown up. There weren't enough left working for all the families, so they drew lots to see who would get one. One family had to wait in Kampala until theirs could be repaired. The

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McCoys would get a ride to Mbale, where a replacement crawler had been arranged.

Joseph got that tight look on his face when things didn't go the way they were supposed to. Mama patted him on the arm and said this was Africa and they had to learn to think like Africans. Everything would come right in the end.

After three days of Willamette being afraid to breathe for fear of setting off another asthma attack and then sure she was going to murder that Stephen if he said another word to her and hoping she wouldn't cry in front of Mama, who needed her to be brave and strong, they were ready to go.

The city seemed to go on forever, dirt roads and shacks and people sitting in the shade like piles of old laundry. But everyone was feeling good to be on their way again. Dad and Joseph sang songs in English and then in Swahili.

"They teach you that back home?" the Reclamation guide said. His rich brown skin gleamed in the sunlight as if it had been oiled. He held the steering wheel with one hand and his Uzi with the other.

Dad's shoulders bunched up tight. Joseph said, "This is the land of our ancestors—"

"A blind man can see your people came from out West Africa."

Until now, the guide had been easy and soft-spoken. Now there was an edge to his voice, as if he somehow associated Willamette's family with the centuries-dead slave trade. She didn't understand how people could blame each other for things that happened so long ago.

"It doesn't matter," Mama said quietly. "We are Africans now."

"Beggin' your pardon, ma'am, but no. Not till Africa leaves her mark on you. It's you who belong to the land then and not the other way around."

Willamette looked away, her vision fanning over the grasses. The sense of something waiting rose up like billowed dust. She looked for lions, but none appeared. That night, she dreamed of their tawny shapes sifting through the wind-rippled grass.

From Mbale, they went on alone. The Reclamation Project supplied them with tools, food, and prefab shelter, as well as incubators for the chickens and disease-resistant cattle embryos. They piled everything into their crawler, a patchwork cobbled together from Yugo and LandRover parts with an ancient Toyota drive. They took turns walking beside the crawler in the shadow of its outstretched solar wings.

The road went from gravel to dirt to nothing. They saw only abandoned villages, twiggy fragments of skeletons instead of huts.

It wasn't nearly as hot as Willamette had expected, not here at three thousand feet. Jacaranda and hibiscus grew wild from the rich volcanic

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soil. Even the air smelled different, reckless and strong. The sky seemed to go on forever and had colors in it Willamette had never seen before.

Stephen spotted the first gazelle. He'd been riding on top, crouched between the crawler's curving solar wings, while Dad eased it over the tufted ground. Willamette ran ahead, smelling the grass and the sky, wishing she had unpacked the football. At Stephen's shout, Dad braked.

There they were, the color of sand and caramel, heads popping up like jack-in-the-boxes, ears pricked, tails wiggling. Willamette thought she'd never seen anything so beautiful in her life.

The gazelles decided they were safe and went back to grazing. "Once," Dad said, sweeping the horizon with one hand, "all this land was desert, overgrazed with the white man's cattle, overrun by armies carrying the white man's weapons. But in the end, Africa took back her own."

Africa, Willamette thought, *Mother Africa.*

They spotted more gazelle and giraffe, a herd of zebras and another of the dark shaggy beasts that Mama said were gnus and then Stephen made a joke about "No gnus is good news" and everyone groaned.

Then the elephants came, gray as shadows against the horizon. Willamette thought that if trees could walk, they'd move like that.

"Oooh," she said, "let's go closer."

"No, baby," said Dad. "Let them be. When I was a kid, everyone said how soon there would be no more elephants left. They're miracles."

"Oh, LeVar, you're such a dreamer," said Mama, and gave a little laugh.

Willamette looked from one parent to the other and something came bursting up in her, something hot and bright and singing.

They made camp, checked for termite hills and snakes, cut a bare patch in the matted grass to set the solar stove. Mama poured out the water carefully. They were running low and had given up washing their clothes, or even changing them every day. When they reached the river, they'd disinfect enough water to refill their carriers.

Willamette lay awake after the others had gone to sleep. She gazed up at the stars, so many and so far, and thought how strange it was that the night could have so much light in it.

She woke startled, as if her body jumped all by itself. The sky was no longer dark, but that milky color before sunrise turned it yellow. The earth gave off a sweet damp smell. The insects hadn't woken up yet; she could almost touch the quiet. Every once in a while, she heard a faint familiar snoring.

The scratching noise sounded like claws on metal. If she hadn't been holding her breath, listening, she might have missed it. Something was scavenging in the aluminum food bins.

Soft as she could, she rolled to her hands and knees. Stephen would have shouted to scare the animal off, but some lonely part of her didn't

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want it scared off. She would tame this wild creature, this part of Mother Africa, and they would belong to each other forever.

A rounded shape huddled beside the dark rectangle of the crawler. She crept closer. Her palms pressed soundlessly into the cool dirt. Grass roots tangled around her fingers.

The sounds stopped abruptly. She froze. The creature's head shot up. Two round eyes, rimmed with white, met hers. She glimpsed a nose like a button and a shirt that was a collection of string, nothing more. The kid looked to be about six, but she couldn't be sure.

"Geez!" Willamette managed to keep her voice to a whisper. "You scared the daylights out of me!"

The kid scuttled backward so fast he crashed into the crawler's tire and fell over. He curled himself into a little ball, hugging his knees to his chest and whimpering.

"Hey!" Willamette said, making her voice soft. "Hey, I won't hurt you." She held out one hand the way she would to a frightened puppy, if she'd ever had one. "It's okay." Maybe the kid couldn't understand English. She tried again in Swahili, but the kid only looked more terrified than ever.

Willamette looked around for something she could offer him. She spotted a tin of candy bars in the pile of food bins. She ran her fingernails over the lid.

The whimpers stopped. She pried the lid off, took out a bar, crinkled the wrapping foil. The kid uncurled a little more. She tore open the wrapper, took a nibble. The smell and taste of the chocolate filled her head. "Mmmm," she hummed, rubbing her tummy and smacking her lips. His mouth fell open and his tummy rumbled.

She held out the rest of the bar. "Come on, you can have it. It's good. Aren't you hungry?"

The kid whimpered again and for a moment she thought he'd bolt, famished though he was. She crouched there, holding out the bar. The chocolate felt slippery between her fingers. The kid launched himself at her, snatched the candy, scrambled backward, and stuffed it into his mouth. He reminded Willamette of a Tidepool Museum crab, all jerky legs and bulgy eyes. She put one hand over her mouth, smothering a giggle.

"You want more?" The sound of her voice seemed to soothe him. That, or he was too busy eating to care. He finished the candy bar, licked his filthy fingers, and held out one hand, "M–m–m–"

She dug out a second bar, tore open the wrapper. This time she didn't hold it out so far. He came closer and swiped at it with one hand. She snatched it closer to her. "Come and get it." With a little jockeying back and forth, she got him to sit while she handed him gobs of the sticky, half-melted stuff.

Dad stirred in his sleep. The kid jumped. Joseph woke up with a gurgling start. Before the kid could take off, Willamette wrapped her arms

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around him. He mewed like a terrified kitten and struggled, but didn't try to hurt her.

The next moment Mama and the others were standing all around Willamette and the kid had gone rigid.

"My lord," said Mama. "Come here, you poor thing." She gathered up the child. He wrapped his dirty arms around her and hid his face against her breasts.

"Mama!" cried Stephen.

"Corinne, just what in God's name do you think you're doing?" Dad said.

"I found him and he's mine!" Willamette said.

"He's just a baby," Mama said in a crooning voice. She stroked the kid's hair. He kept on shivering.

"Get away from him this minute!" Dad shouted.

"If you mean slim disease, he doesn't seem to be sick," Mama said. "He's not running a fever. But he can't make it on his own out here."

They went on like that for a while, Dad pacing and shouting, Mama rocking the kid, who was holding on to her like one of those monkey babies. Finally Mama put the kid aside and got to her feet. "I will not leave a child to starve to death."

"His own folks—" Joseph began, but hushed at Mama's glare.

The only thing Dad said, once they were under way again, the kid still in Mama's lap and her in the passenger seat, "We better get to that river pretty soon. Kid's gonna need a bath."

They came to the river marked on their maps later that same day. Almost, Willamette thought, as if Mother Africa were giving them whatever they needed to take care of the kid. By then, the kid had relaxed enough to start talking. He knew English, after all.

Dad told everyone for the tenth time that morning that they could splash around all they liked after they'd dosed themselves with Flukegard, but every single drop they drank had to be disinfected first. And to use the bug repellent, because tsetse flies were a problem in brushy areas. They'd had all the shots, but the bites were supposed to be painful.

Joseph stopped the crawler at the edge of the trees. Everyone jumped out, laughing. Mama took her bag and started upriver with Willamette. The kid went with them, clinging to Mama's hand. Stephen made a face that said he thought it wasn't right, but Dad motioned him to hush.

Willamette stripped and waded out into the thick, greeny-brown water. She splashed it over her shoulders and up in her armpits, shivering and laughing. Back on the bank, Mama had coaxed the kid out of his rags. His ribs were a row of slats and his shoulder blades jutted out like angel's wings. Mama carried him into the water, talking to him the whole time.

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She got a brick of soap from her bag and lathered him up good. He kicked the water and giggled.

My Mama, Willamette thought, *could charm the socks off a snake.*

Willamette swam out to the center of the river, taking long, lazy strokes. The current tugged at her, colder. She thought of crocodiles or giant snakes lurking in the hidden depths. She kicked hard and headed back.

In the bag were clothes for the kid, a shirt and shorts, almost clean. They were too big for him, being Willamette's. She didn't say anything after she'd caught the smile on the kid's face and the look in Mama's eyes.

"We'll stay here another day or two," Mama said as they got dressed. The kid had let go of her hand, although he still stayed close. "While the drinking water disinfects, I want to wash every single piece of dirty clothing."

They all sorted laundry and carried it down to the river, scrubbed it, found flat clean rocks to spread it to dry. Willamette and the kid stayed close to Mama. Mama sang, "The Water is Wide" and "Wading in the River"; she didn't care where a song had come from so long as she liked it. The boy hummed a little. Willamette wondered if he remembered singing with his own mother.

They headed back toward the crawler the way they'd come, not following the river but back along a little path through the trees. They heard men's voices before they saw them.

Dad and the boys stood talking to four or five men. They wore cut-off jeans and shirts that might have been red but were now mud-colored. They held spears, long sticks, and one banged-up rifle. A dozen or so scrawny cattle had waded into the middle of the river. Flies covered the sores on their hip bones.

Willamette could tell Dad was uptight by the way his shoulders hunched. The kid took one look at the men and jumped into Mama's arms, almost knocking her over.

"What's going on?" Willamette whispered. She couldn't take her eyes off the gun. All the stories about tribal feuds came rushing into her head, all the warnings.

"It's all right," said Mama.

The men had spotted them and shouted. One of them waved his spear. Mama set her lips together and took hold of the kid.

Willamette's knees were knocking together. She kept telling herself the things Dad had said, that these were their own people, their brothers. The man with the rifle didn't look very brotherly with his lips pulled back from broken teeth.

Dad said something about this being his wife and child.

The man jabbed the kid with the end of his rifle. The kid let out a yip and grabbed Mama tighter. "This no child of yours."

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Mama lifted her chin. "This is a child we are caring for."

Another jab. The kid squirmed and whimpered. The man laughed. Then he launched into a gabble in his own language. The other men said stuff that sounded like they agreed with him. One gestured toward Mama.

"Now just a minute!" Dad said in his you-better-not-mess-with-me voice. "I told you that's my wife. You keep away from her."

"Not hurt woman. We take child. Send him south to quarantine district."

"And who will take care of him there?" said Mama.

The man shrugged, as if this was no concern of his.

The next instant, Dad put his six feet three in between the man with the rifle and Mama. "You lay one finger on my woman or my child or anything else in my camp and I'll personally wring your neck." He looked like he could do it, too, even though he'd gone a little paunchy since he played tight end at college.

"Our grandfathers told us once this land was rich. We had many cattle. Our granaries were full. Then foreign devils come from the south." The man sounded frantic now. "They bring slim disease and all manner misfortune! Foreign devils must go home!"

He means us, too, Willamette thought.

"The only devil I see is the one standing in front of me," said Dad.

The man motioned to the others. They rounded up the cattle, who by now had made a muddy mess of the river bank, and herded them away.

Willamette went to the nearest rock and sank down. Her heart pounded hard enough to jump out of her chest. She couldn't tell if she wanted to cry or laugh or throw up. Mama told her to put her head between her knees.

"They'll be back," Joseph said. He got their rifle out of the crawler.

They loaded up as much water as was ready and went on. They saw no more signs of the strange men. As they set up camp, a quiet settled over the land, as if the sky were holding its breath. Color seeped in, yellow glowing to orange and then inky blue, so rich and soft that Willamette's eyes hurt to look at it. Her heart caught in her throat. A humming began in her bones, a feeling that all she had to do was stretch out her wings, like precious things of gold and burnished copper and inky lapis blue.

This is Mother Africa, where life began, she thought. *This is where it goes on forever.*

The camp exploded with noise, a shot, then two more, punching through the sounds of men shouting and a high quick scream. Willamette couldn't move, couldn't breathe. Her eyes locked on Joseph scrambling to his feet, Dad wrestling with a man in a red shirt. Mama hunched over, cursing in a hoarse voice. Another man ran toward her with something in his hands. . . .

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"No!" Willamette yelled and sprinted for the man. Her feet slapped the ground. She pumped with her arms. Every nerve in her body caught fire. The man was almost on top of Mama. Willamette leapt and grabbed, just the way Dad taught her, just the way she did with Stephen. She tackled him around the knees, his legs buckled, and they both went down.

The impact knocked the breath out of her. The man twisted like a snake and grabbed her around the neck. She clawed at his arms. His bones were hard as flint under papery skin. He shouted, but she couldn't understand him. Pain shot down her neck. Her vision went gray. Her ears roared. She kicked out at nothing, screamed, tried to pry his fingers free.

Another shot went off. Dad yelled, or maybe it was Joseph.

Willamette sank her teeth into the man's forearm as hard as she could. He thrashed around, his voice wild. The pressure on her neck eased. He jerked away. She heard the *pad–pad–pad* of running bare feet, then stillness.

Willamette lay in the dust. Her lungs wheezed and her whole body hurt. She told herself, *They're gone, it's okay, it's over.*

From a few feet away, she heard sobbing, then shouts. Someone touched her arm. Her vision cleared a little. She recognized Stephen, looking down at her. He called, "She's okay!" There was something wrong with his voice.

Jagged electric heat shot through her. *Adrenaline.* Mama always said it was the best thing for asthma. *Gotta breathe to fight that tiger, Wil,* she'd say.

Willamette sat up. The strange men were gone. Dad crouched on the ground, his back toward her. Joseph, holding the rifle, stood beside him. Shadows hid his face. She could see Mama's legs sticking out. There was something spooky about the way they splayed out, so graceless and loose.

Willamette scrambled across the dust. She could hardly see. Tears had sprung into her eyes out of nowhere. Stephen tried to catch her in his arms, but she slipped by him. Then Dad turned and when she saw his face, she stopped.

"Don't look." Dad's voice belonged to someone else. "She was protecting the boy."

Willamette didn't dare say anything or she'd break into a hundred pieces.

"That goddamned kid!" said Joseph. "I wish we'd left him where we found him. I wish we'd let them have him. Mama might still—might still—"

"Hush up!" popped out of Willamette, just like Mama would have said. She took a deep breath. "Stand aside."

Dad hesitated. His eyes made jerky little lost movements. Stephen came around and put his arm around him. "Let her, Dad. Mama always said Wil had good instincts. Strong instincts."

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Stephen, who teased her and raced her and beat her purple, standing up for her now?

One part of her was screaming and another had gone numb and cold and gray. Yet something silent and powerful coursed through her. Her legs stopped shaking. The earth itself seemed to rise and hold her up. Slowly, as if each step had its own secret meaning, she moved to Mama's side.

Mama lay on her back, one arm outstretched, fingers curled to the sky. The other arm cradled the boy against her full soft breasts. One half of his skull had been blown away.

Mama's eyes were open, peaceful like a house when the people have all gone to sleep. A dark trickle ran from one corner of her mouth. Willamette wanted to touch her finger to it, to see if it were real, but a spell had come over Mama, a stillness, a sacredness.

She thought of laying Mama in the warm rich African earth. She thought of going on without her. She thought of the way Africa had renewed itself, the animals and the sky, the grasses covering the scars of bombs and plantations. She wondered if some of that aliveness might seep into Mama's bones, might seep into her own.

The men would do the digging, metal shovel blades slicing through the living soil. They would weep, outwardly and inwardly, because it was the need of men to weep. They would turn to her and ask, "How can we go on without her?"

She would lead them, even as Mama had led them. To keep their promise, to bring life to the villages again.

The vision faded, like the night mist burning off in the stark African sun, and she was once more a girl on the brink of womanhood who had just lost her mother, but no, she would never be a little girl again, she would never be the same. Whenever she spoke, she would hear her mother's voice ringing through hers and another voice, deeper and resonant with things she could almost feel and never imagine, and she would know that Mother Africa had left its terrible mark on her forever. ●

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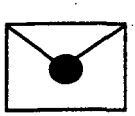

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REPORT TO MOCTEZUMA

Oh my Most Glorious Lord Moctezuma,
your humble servant has discovered a vast continent,
far beyond the eastern ocean,
where there is much that you would find remarkable.
The customs of the peoples whom I have encountered
are barbaric, my Lord,
yet hold a certain unpleasant fascination.
The inhabitants of this strange land
affect striking and colorful raiment
to compensate for their pallid complexions.
They still believe in witches;
they are wholly ignorant of medicine, and of soap.
They have discovered iron, printing, and gunpowder,
but their chief means of land transportation
is a great surly beast variously called *steed*, *mount*, *horse*
(I am sending one with this summary, my Lord),
for they have yet to harness the power of steam.
They know nothing of submersible vessels,
and the airship is utterly beyond their comprehension—
when we first flew over one of their sprawling cities,
they ran shrieking in the unpaved, filthy streets,
calling upon their odd trifurcated god to have mercy.
They are a depressing lot of savages, my Lord.
I doubt that they would even make decent slaves.
Appropriate measures are therefore being taken,
and the priests, at least, are in high spirits.

—Steven Utley

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James Patrick Kelly

ITSY BITSY SPIDER

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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With his June 1995 novelette, "Think Like a Dinosaur," James Patrick Kelly has entered the ranks of Hugo-Award-winning authors. He tells us his newest tale "is one of those stories with a long incubation period. Although it makes no reference to the stories, it is conceptually of a piece with 'Home Front' (June 1988) and 'Pogrom' (January 1991)." After walking around for two years with the title of the story on a scrap of paper in his wallet, the author "slammed out a first draft in five days while teaching at Clarion in 1996—just to prove to the whippersnappers (and myself) that I could still produce at panic speed." The final version is about a third again as long and much changed from its original incarnation. Mr. Kelly's first short story collection, *Think Like a Dinosaur and Other Stories,* is just out from Golden Gryphon Press.

When I found out that my father was still alive after all these years and living at Strawberry Fields, I thought he'd gotten just what he deserved. Retroburbs are where the old, scared people go to hide. I'd always pictured the people in them as deranged losers. Visiting some fantasy world like the disneys or Carlucci's Carthage is one thing, *moving* to one is another. Sure, 2038 is messy, but it's a hell of a lot better than nineteen-sixty-whatever.

Now that I'd arrived at 144 Bluejay Way, I realized that the place was worse than I had imagined. Strawberry Fields was pretending to be some long-lost suburb of the late twentieth century, except that it had the sterile monotony of cheap VR. It was clean, all right, and neat, but it was everywhere the same. And the scale was wrong. The lots were squeezed together and all the houses had shrunk—like the dreams of their owners. They were about the size of a one-car garage, modular units tarted up at the factory to look like ranches, with old double-hung storm windows and hardened siding of harvest gold, barn red, forest green. Of course, there were no real garages; faux Mustangs and VW buses cruised the quiet streets. Their carbrains were listening for a summons from Barbara Chesley next door at 142, or the Goltzes across the street, who might be headed to Penny Lanes to bowl a few frames, or the hospital to die.

There was a beach chair with blue nylon webbing on the front stoop of 144 Bluejay Way. A brick walk led to it, dividing two patches of carpet moss, green as a dream. There were names and addresses printed in huge lightstick letters on all the doors in the neighborhood; no doubt many Strawberry Fielders were easily confused. The owner of this one was Peter Fancy. He had been born Peter Fanelli, but had legally taken his stage name not long after his first success as Prince Hal in *Henry IV Part 1.* I was a Fancy too; the name was one of the few things of my father's I had kept.

I stopped at the door and let it look me over. "You're Jen," it said.

"Yes." I waited in vain for it to open or to say something else. "I'd like to

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see Mr. Fancy, please." The old man's house had worse manners than he did. "He knows I'm coming," I said. "I sent him several messages." Which he had never answered, but I didn't mention that.

"Just a minute," said the door. "She'll be right with you."

She? The idea that he might be with another woman now hadn't occurred to me. I'd lost track of my father a long time ago—on purpose. The last time we'd actually visited overnight was when I was twenty. Mom gave me a ticket to Port Gemini, where he was doing the Shakespeare in Space program. The orbital was great, but staying with him was like being under water. I think I must have held my breath for the entire week. After that, there were a few, sporadic calls, a couple of awkward dinners—all at his instigation. Then twenty-three years of nothing.

I never hated him, exactly. When he left, I just decided to show solidarity with Mom and be done with him. If acting was more important than his family, then to hell with Peter Fancy. Mom was horrified when I told her how I felt. She cried and claimed the divorce was as much her fault as his. It was too much for me to handle; I was only eleven years old when they separated. I needed to be on *someone's* side and so I had chosen her. She never did stop trying to talk me into finding him again, even though after a while it only made me mad at her. For the past few years, she'd been warning me that I'd developed a warped view of men.

But she was a smart woman, my mom—a winner. Sure, she'd had troubles, but she'd founded three companies, was a millionaire by twenty-five. I missed her.

A lock clicked and the door opened. Standing in the dim interior was a little girl in a gold-and-white checked dress. Her dark, curly hair was tied in a ribbon. She was wearing white ankle socks and black Mary Jane shoes that were so shiny they had to be plastic. There was a Band-Aid on her left knee.

"Hello, Jen. I was hoping you'd really come." Her voice surprised me. It was resonant, impossibly mature. At first glance I'd guessed she was three, maybe four; I'm not much good at guessing kids' ages. Now I realized that this must be a bot—a made person.

"You look just like I thought you would." She smiled, stood on tiptoe and raised a delicate little hand over her head. I had to bend to shake it. The hand was warm, slightly moist, and very realistic. She had to belong to Strawberry Fields; there was no way my father could afford a bot with skin this real.

"Please come in." She waved on the lights. "We're so happy you're here." The door closed behind me.

The playroom took up almost half of the little house. Against one wall was a miniature kitchen. Toy dishes were drying in a rack next to the sink; the pink refrigerator barely came up to my waist. The table was full-sized; it had two normal chairs and a booster chair. Opposite this was a bed with a ruffled Pumpkin Patty bedspread. About a dozen dolls and

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stuffed animals were arranged along the far edge of the mattress. I recognized most of them: Pooh, Mr. Moon, Baby Rollypolly, the Sleepums, Big Bird. And the wallpaper was familiar too: Oz figures like Toto and the Wizard and the Cowardly Lion on a field of Munchkin blue.

"We had to make a few changes," said the bot. "Do you like it?"

The room seemed to tilt then. I took a small, unsteady step and everything righted itself. *My* dolls, *my* wallpaper, the chest of drawers from Grandma Fanelli's cottage in Hyannis. I stared at the bot and recognized her for the first time.

She was me.

"What is this," I said, "some kind of sick joke?" I felt like I'd just been slapped in the face.

"Is something wrong?" the bot said. "Tell me. Maybe we can fix it."

I swiped at her and she danced out of reach. I don't know what I would have done if I had caught her. Maybe smashed her through the picture window onto the patch of front lawn or shaken her until pieces started falling off. But the bot wasn't responsible, my father was. Mom would never have defended him if she'd known about *this*. The old bastard. I couldn't believe it. Here I was, shuddering with anger, after years of feeling nothing for him.

There was an interior door just beyond some shelves filled with old-fashioned paper books. I didn't take time to look as I went past, but I knew that Dr. Seuss and A.A. Milne and L. Frank Baum would be on those shelves. The door had no knob.

"Open up," I shouted. It ignored me, so I kicked it. "Hey!"

"Jennifer." The bot tugged at the back of my jacket. "I must ask you . . ."

"You can't have me!" I pressed my ear to the door. Silence. "I'm not this thing you made." I kicked it again. "You hear?"

Suddenly an announcer was shouting in the next room. *". . . Into the post to Russell, who kicks it out to Havlicek all alone at the top of the key, he shoots . . . and Baylor with the strong rebound."* The asshole was trying to drown me out.

"If you don't come away from that door right now," said the bot, "I'm calling security."

"What are they going to do?" I said. "I'm the long-lost daughter, here for a visit. And who the hell are *you*, anyway?"

"I'm bonded to him, Jen. Your father is no longer competent to handle his own affairs. I'm his legal guardian."

"Shit." I kicked the door one last time, but my heart wasn't in it. I shouldn't have been surprised that he had slipped over the edge. He was almost ninety.

"If you want to sit and talk, I'd like that very much." The bot gestured toward a banana yellow beanbag chair. "Otherwise, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

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* * *

It was the shock of seeing the bot, I told myself—I'd reacted like a hurt little girl. But I was a grown woman and it was time to start behaving like one. I wasn't here to let Peter Fancy worm his way back into my feelings. I had come because of Mom.

"Actually," I said, "I'm here on business." I opened my purse. "If you're running his life now, I guess this is for you." I passed her the envelope and settled back, tucking my legs beneath me. There is no way for an adult to sit gracefully in a beanbag chair.

She slipped the check out. "It's from Mother." She paused, then corrected herself, "Her estate." She didn't seem surprised.

"Yes."

"It's too generous."

"That's what I thought."

"She must've taken care of you too?"

"I'm fine." I wasn't about to discuss the terms of Mom's will with my father's toy daughter.

"I would've liked to have known her," said the bot. She slid the check back into the envelope and set it aside. "I've spent a lot of time imagining Mother."

I had to work hard not to snap at her. Sure, this bot had at least a human equivalent intelligence and would be a free citizen someday, assuming she didn't break down first. But she had a cognizor for a brain and a heart fabricated in a vat. How could she possibly imagine my mom, especially when all she had to go on was whatever lies *he* had told her?

"So how bad is he?"

She gave me a sad smile and shook her head. "Some days are better than others. He has no clue who President Huong is or about the quake, but he can still recite the dagger scene from *Macbeth*. I haven't told him that Mother died. He'd just forget it ten minutes later."

"Does he know what you are?"

"I am many things, Jen."

"Including me."

"You're a role I'm playing, not who I am." She stood. "Would you like some tea?"

"Okay." I still wanted to know why Mom had left my father four hundred and thirty-eight thousand dollars in her will. If he couldn't tell me, maybe the bot could.

She went to her kitchen, opened a cupboard, and took out a regular-sized cup. It looked like a bucket in her little hand. "I don't suppose you still drink Constant Comment?"

His favorite. I had long since switched to rafallo. "That's fine." I remembered that when I was a kid my father used to brew cups for the two of us from the same bag because Constant Comment was so expensive. "I thought they went out of business long ago."

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"I mix my own. I'd be interested to hear how accurate you think the recipe is."

"I suppose you know how I like it?"

She chuckled.

"So, does he need the money?"

The microwave dinged. "Very few actors get rich," said the bot. I didn't think there had been microwaves in the sixties, but then strict historical accuracy wasn't really the point of Strawberry Fields. "Especially when they have a weakness for Shakespeare."

"Then how come he lives here and not in some flop? And how did he afford *you?*"

She pinched sugar between her index finger and thumb, then rubbed them together over the cup. It was something I still did, but only when I was by myself. A nasty habit; Mom used to yell at him for teaching it to me. "I was a gift." She shook a teabag loose from a canister shaped like an acorn and plunged it into the boiling water. "From Mother."

The bot offered the cup to me; I accepted it nervelessly. "That's not true." I could feel the blood draining from my face.

"I can lie if you'd prefer, but I'd rather not." She pulled the booster chair away from the table and turned it to face me. "There are many things about themselves that they never told us, Jen. I've always wondered why that was."

I felt logy and a little stupid, as if I had just woken from a thirty-year nap. "She just gave you to him?"

"And bought him this house, paid all his bills, yes."

"But why?"

"*You* knew her," said the bot. "I was hoping you could tell me."

I couldn't think of what to say or do. Since there was a cup in my hand, I took a sip. For an instant, the scent of tea and dried oranges carried me back to when I was a little girl and I was sitting in Grandma Fanelli's kitchen in a wet bathing suit, drinking Constant Comment that my father had made to keep my teeth from chattering. There were knots like brown eyes in the pine walls and the green linoleum was slick where I had dripped on it.

"Well?"

"It's good," I said absently and raised the cup to her. "No, really, just like I remember."

She clapped her hands in excitement. "So," said the bot. "What was Mother like?"

It was an impossible question, so I tried to let it bounce off me. But then neither of us said anything; we just stared at each other across a yawning gulf of time and experience. In the silence, the question stuck. Mom had died three months ago and this was the first time since the funeral that I'd thought of her as she really had been—not the papery ghost in the hospital room. I remembered how, after she divorced my father,

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she always took my calls when she was at the office, even if it was late, and how she used to step on imaginary brakes whenever I drove her anywhere, and how grateful I was that she didn't cry when I told her that Rob and I were getting divorced. I thought about Easter eggs and raspberry Pop Tarts and when she sent me to Antibes for a year when I was fourteen and that perfume she wore on my father's opening nights and the way they used to waltz on the patio at the house in Waltham.

"West is walking the ball upcourt, setting his offense with fifteen seconds to go on the shot clock, nineteen in the half . . ."

The beanbag chair that I was in faced the picture window. Behind me, I could hear the door next to the bookcase open.

"Jones and Goodrich are in each other's jerseys down low and now Chamberlain swings over and calls for the ball on the weak side . . ."

I twisted around to look over my shoulder. The great Peter Fancy was making his entrance.

Mom once told me that when she met my father, he was typecast playing men that women fall hopelessly in love with. He'd had great successes as Stanley Kowalski in *Streetcar* and Skye Masterson in *Guys and Dolls* and the Vicomte de Valmont in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. The years had eroded his good looks but had not obliterated them; from a distance he was still a handsome man. He had a shock of close-cropped white hair. The beautiful cheekbones were still there; the chin was as sharply defined as it had been in his first headshot. His gray eyes were distant and a little dreamy, as if he were preoccupied with the War of the Roses or the problem of evil.

"Jen," he said, "what's going on out here?" He still had the big voice that could reach into the second balcony without a mike. I thought for a moment he was talking to me.

"We have company, Daddy," said the bot, in a four-year-old trill that took me by surprise. "A lady."

"I can see that it's a lady, sweetheart." He took a hand from the pocket of his jeans, stroked the touchpad on his belt and his exolegs walked him stiffly across the room. "I'm Peter Fancy," he said.

"The lady is from Strawberry Fields." The bot swung around behind my father. She shot me a look that made the terms and conditions of my continued presence clear: if I broke the illusion, I was out. "She came by to see if everything is all right with our house." The bot disurbed me even more, now that she sounded like young Jen Fancy.

As I heaved myself out of the beanbag chair, my father gave me one of those lopsided, flirting grins I knew so well. "Does the lady have a name?" He must have shaved just for the company, because now that he had come close I could see that he had a couple of fresh nicks. There was a button-sized patch of gray whiskers by his ear that he had missed altogether.

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"Her name is Ms. Johnson," said the bot. It was my ex, Rob's, last name. I had never been Jennifer Johnson.

"Well, Ms. Johnson," he said, hooking thumbs in his pants pockets. "The water in my toilet is brown."

"I'll . . . um . . . see that it's taken care of." I was at a loss for what to say next, then inspiration struck. "Actually, I had another reason for coming." I could see the bot stiffen. "I don't know if you've seen *Yesterday*, our little newsletter? Anyway, I was talking to Mrs. Chesley next door and she told me that you were an actor once. I was wondering if I might interview you. Just a few questions, if you have the time. I think your neighbors might . . ."

"Were?" he said, drawing himself up. "*Once?* Madame, I am now an actor and will always be."

"My Daddy's famous," said the bot.

I cringed at that; it was something I used to say. My father squinted at me. "What did you say your name was?"

"Johnson," I said. "Jane Johnson."

"And you're a reporter? You're sure you're not a critic?"

"Positive."

He seemed satisfied. "I'm Peter Fancy." He extended his right hand to shake. The hand was spotted and bony and it trembled like a reflection in a lake. Clearly whatever magic—or surgeon's skill—it was that had preserved my father's face had not extended to his extremities. I was so disturbed by his infirmity that I took his cold hand in mine and pumped it three, four times. It was dry as a page of one of the bot's dead books. When I let go, the hand seemed steadier. He gestured at the beanbag.

"Sit," he said. "Please."

After I had settled in, he tapped the touchpad and stumped over to the picture window. "Barbara Chesley is a broken and bitter old woman," he said, "and I will not have dinner with her under any circumstances, do you understand?" He peered up Bluejay Way and down.

"Yes, Daddy," said the bot.

"I believe she voted for Nixon, so she has no reason to complain now." Apparently satisfied that the neighbors weren't sneaking up on us, he leaned against the windowsill, facing me. "Mrs. Thompson, I think today may well be a happy one for both of us. I have an announcement." He paused for effect. "I've been thinking of Lear again."

The bot settled onto one of her little chairs. "Oh, Daddy, that's wonderful."

"It's the only one of the big four I haven't done," said my father. "I was set for a production in Stratford, Ontario, back in '99; Polly Matthews was to play Cordelia. Now there was an actor; she could bring tears to a stone. But then my wife Hannah had one of her bad times and I had to withdraw so I could take care of Jen. The two of us stayed down at my mother's cottage on the Cape; I wasted the entire season tending bar.

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And when Hannah came out of rehab, she decided that she didn't want to be married to an underemployed actor anymore, so things were tight for a while. She had all the money, so I had to scramble—spent almost two years on the road. But I think it might have been for the best. I was only forty-eight. Too old for Hamlet, too young for Lear. My Hamlet was very well received, you know. There were overtures from PBS about a taping, but that was when the BBC decided to do the Shakespeare series with that doctor, what was his name? Jonathan Miller. So instead of Peter Fancy, we had Derek Jacobi, whose brilliant idea it was to roll across the stage, frothing his lines like a rabid raccoon. You'd think he'd seen an alien, not his father's ghost. Well, that was another missed opportunity, except, of course, that I was too young. Ripeness is all, eh? So I still have Lear to do. Unfinished business. My comeback."

He bowed, then pivoted solemnly so that I saw him in profile, framed by the picture window. "Where have I been? Where am I? Fair daylight?" He held up a trembling hand and blinked at it uncomprehendingly. "I know not what to say. I swear these are not my hands."

Suddenly the bot was at his feet. "O look upon me, sir," she said, in her childish voice, "and hold your hand in benediction o'er me."

"Pray, do not mock me." My father gathered himself in the flood of morning light. "I am a very foolish, fond old man, fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less; and to deal plainly, I fear I am not in my perfect mind."

He stole a look in my direction, as if to gauge my reaction to his impromptu performance. A frown might have stopped him, a word would have crushed him. Maybe I should have, but I was afraid he'd start talking about Mom again, telling me things I didn't want to know. So I watched instead, transfixed.

"Methinks I should know you . . ." He rested his hand briefly on the bot's head. ". . . and know this stranger." He fumbled at the controls and the exolegs carried him across the room toward me. As he drew nearer, he seemed to sluff off the years. "Yet I am mainly ignorant what place this is; and all the skill I have remembers not these garments, nor I know not where I did lodge last night." It was Peter Fancy who stopped before me; his face a mere kiss away from mine. "Do not laugh at me; for, as I am a man, I think this lady to be my child. Cordelia."

He was staring right at me, into me, knifing through make-believe indifference to the wound I'd nursed all these years, the one that had never healed. He seemed to expect a reply, only I didn't have the line. A tiny, sad squeaky voice within me was whimpering, *You left me and you got exactly what you deserve.* But my throat tightened and choked it off.

The bot cried, "And so I am! I am!"

But she had distracted him. I could see confusion begin to deflate him. "Be your tears wet? Yes, faith. I pray . . . weep not. If you have poison for me, I will drink it. I know you do not love me. . . ."

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He stopped and his brow wrinkled. "It's something about the sisters," he muttered.

"Yes," said the bot, " '. . . for your sisters have done me wrong . . .' "

"Don't feed me the fucking lines!" he shouted at her. "I'm Peter Fancy, god damn it!"

After she calmed him down, we had lunch. She let him make the peanut butter and banana sandwiches while she heated up some Campbell's tomato and rice soup, which she poured from a can made of actual metal. The sandwiches were lumpy because he had hacked the bananas into chunks the size of walnuts. She tried to get him to tell me about the daylilies blooming in the backyard, and the old Boston Garden, and the time he and Mom had had breakfast with Bobby Kennedy. She asked whether he wanted TV dinner or pot pie for supper. He refused all her conversational gambits. He only ate half a bowl of soup.

He pushed back from the table and announced that it was her nap time. The bot put up a perfunctory fuss, although it was clear that it was my father who was tired out. However, the act seemed to perk him up. Another role for his resume: the doting father. "I'll tell you what," he said. "We'll play your game, sweetheart. But just once—otherwise you'll be cranky tonight."

The two of them perched on the edge of the bot's bed next to Big Bird and the Sleepums. My father started to sing and the bot immediately joined in.

"The itsy bitsy spider went up the water spout."

Their gestures were almost mirror images, except that his ruined hands actually looked like spiders as they climbed into the air.

"Down came the rain, and washed the spider out."

The bot beamed at him as if he were the only person in the world.

"Out came the sun, and dried up all the rain.

"And the itsy bitsy spider went up the spout again."

When his arms were once again raised over his head, she giggled and hugged him. He let them fall around her, returning her embrace. "That's a good girl," he said. "That's my Jenny."

The look on his face told me that I had been wrong: this was no act. It was as real to him as it was to me. I had tried hard not to, but I still remembered how the two of us always used to play together, Daddy and Jenny, Jen and Dad.

Waiting for Mommy to come home.

He kissed her and she snuggled under the blankets. I felt my eyes stinging.

"But if you do the play," she said, "when will you be back?"

"What play?"

"That one you were telling me. The king and his daughters."

"There's no such play, Jenny." He sifted her black curls through his

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hands. "I'll never leave you, don't worry now. Never again." He rose unsteadily and caught himself on the chest of drawers.

"Nighty noodle," said the bot.

"Pleasant dreams, sweetheart," said my father. "I love you."

"I love you too."

I expected him to say something to me, but he didn't even seem to realize that I was still in the room. He shambled across the playroom, opened the door to his bedroom and went in.

"I'm sorry about that," said the bot, speaking again as an adult.

"Don't be," I said. I coughed—something in my throat. "It was fine. I was very . . . touched."

"He's usually a lot happier. Sometimes he works in the garden." The bot pulled the blankets aside and swung her legs out of the bed. "He likes to vacuum."

"Yes."

"I take good care of him."

I nodded and reached for my purse. "I can see that." I had to go. "Is it enough?"

She shrugged. "He's my daddy."

"I meant the money. Because if it's not, I'd like to help."

"Thank you. He'd appreciate that."

The front door opened for me, but I paused before stepping out into Strawberry Fields. "What about . . . after?"

"When he dies? My bond terminates. He said he'd leave the house to me. I know you could contest that, but I'll need to sell in order to pay for my twenty-year maintenance."

"No, no. That's fine. You deserve it."

She came to the door and looked up at me, little Jen Fancy and the woman she would never become.

"You know, it's *you* he loves," she said. "I'm just a stand-in."

"He loves his little girl," I said. "Doesn't do me any good—I'm forty-seven."

"It could if you let it." She frowned. "I wonder if that's why Mother did all this. So you'd find out."

"Or maybe she was just plain sorry." I shook my head. She was a smart woman, my mom. I would've liked to have known her.

"So, Ms. Fancy, maybe you can visit us again sometime." The bot grinned and shook my hand. "Daddy's usually in a good mood after his nap. He sits out front on his beach chair and waits for the ice cream truck. He always buys us some. Our favorite is Yellow Submarine. It's vanilla with fat butterscotch swirls, dipped in white chocolate. I know it sounds kind of odd, but it's good."

"Yes," I said absently, thinking about all the things Mom had told me about my father. I was hearing them now for the first time. "That might be nice." ●

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Greg Abraham

FRONT MAN

Although "Front Man" marks Greg Abraham's first solo appearance in these pages, it is his second story for *Asimov's*. His earlier tale, "Mr. Sartorious" (Mid-December 1994), was co-written with Mary Rosenblum. Mr. Abraham has sold stories to *Aboriginal, Aberrations, Century,* and *New Legends*. He's just finished his first SF novel—it's set in the same far future that Ms. Rosenblum borrowed for her story "Flight" (*Asimov's*, February 1995)—and he's embarking on a new book.

Sun

Ron picked up Thump's shirt and examined it front and back. A Pendleton, a wistful plaid of white and azure that Ron had bought before the brisk weather had set in. Each wool fiber caught the October sun like a prism, and the tiny explosions of color almost reminded him of . . . what? Memory balked. Something caught in his throat. Expectation?

Tonight he'd meet one of the Noiesni at Chad's party. Full of anticipation, Ron let the memory escape, whatever it had been. Maybe the past wasn't as important when there was hope.

The Noiesni had come without fanfare, conferring first with PR agencies. Publicists had helped mankind meet an ancient and peaceable race, so advanced that they moved space as easily as they moved through it. Tonight Ron would get to know one of the Noiesni, shake his hand, maybe talk about the beautiful weather.

Ron dropped the Pendleton back onto the heap. Changeable weather had melded with Thump's sweat so that all his clothes had an earthy scent. Thump had a dozen moods, but one scent. Ron settled onto the bed and eased his arms into the shopping bag, slipped out a worsted pullover, green as a cedar forest. Thump's new gray slacks hung from a hanger hitched over the closet doorknob.

Ron loved Thump, but gifts never closed the distance between them. He looked out the window. For all its brilliance, the afternoon sun hadn't warmed the house. He'd looked forward to the party ever since Chad had

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called last week. Chad was the Director of R&D for Zenoquint. The Noiesni had taken an interest in Zeno's GaAs chips. Hardened for war, Zeno's production would be useful in an assisted space program. A *real* space program, not spendthrift shuttles and malfunctioning probes.

The Noiesni would help. With the Noiesni, hope and wonder had reentered the world.

That memory seized Ron again. When he'd been a little boy, the world had sometimes looked as bright as it did today. Sidewalks, trees, and strangers' houses had all seemed lit from within. But the bright past faded, replaced by worry. Thump had never been to Chad's house before, and tonight's party was important.

Thump had come into Ron's life without social skills. Full of rhythm, Thump asked for nothing, accepted anything . . . from others, from himself. Maybe that was part of his problem. What did he need under all that acceptance? Ron still didn't know.

But the need was real: witness the slacks. Twenty-five years old, and Thump didn't have a pair of good wool slacks. Not until today.

Ron went downstairs and wandered into the kitchen, rested his hands on the tile next to the sink. Over there were Thump's shit-encrusted boots, the ones he wore to a ranch on Sauvie Island where he played petting zoo with somebody's cows. Ron watched the aspens shimmer in the backyard. Was it foolish to expect so much from a party? It was like a high school dance all over again, with roles to be played and exciting secrets to be discovered.

A memory . . . decades old . . . a little boy getting out of a truck and the flash of light on the window of a store, and there had been so much wonder. How did you measure the most wonderful day of a life? A child's trip to the store? A cocktail party?

Tonight Ron would meet a Noiesni dignitary. The extraterrestrials were going to save mankind with gentle nudges, demure gestures of technological largesse . . . without messianic splendor or wrath. They inquisitively toured Sony and Kodak and CERN. And they offered public talks at MIT and the Sorbonne. The embarrassing tours of Johannesburg and Cairo were followed by tasteful salons at the United Nations. Visits to Chile and Israel resulted in terse tête-à-têtes. The Noiesni were true aristocrats. Their easy lives made them pleasantly casual in all circumstances, and prepared them to ease the lives of others. The Noiesni had mastered the fabric of space itself, tailored it to suit their wills.

The front door opened. Devil of rhythm, angel of pulse—Thump—Ron counted the beats before the words . . .

"Hey, Ron, you home?"

"Kitchen." No need to say it. Like a hungry kid, Thump always came to the kitchen first. Could the Noiesni bend time the way they bent space? Ron imagined himself eighteen again, with a full head of blond hair,

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young and almost frightened, but Thump remained just as he was now. In the fantasy a powerful hand held Ron's neck while the other took his jaw. The rasp of stubble tore a bullish bawl from his throat, a cry that got swallowed by Thump's lips, sharp from a beer with lunch.

Or just a beer *for* lunch.

Thump pulled open the refrigerator door and draped from it, his hand a magnet that attracted plastic bags.

The clock in the living room chimed five. "We need to get ready." Ron heard it in his voice, the way that life could be so automatic, as if he were part of the clock.

"You said the party wasn't till seven." Thump slammed into the cutting block so hard that it rolled. He'd wind up springing the little brakes on the wheels. He smooched Ron on the cheek and started to eat cheesecake with his fingers. Maybe that was the only way Thump could kiss, like an embarrassed child. But how did a child really kiss? An odd memory from a lifetime ago . . . Ron lost it.

Grunting, Thump licked his lips, tongue slurried with cheesecake. He ate the rest of it, furrowed his brow, took the bags back to the fridge, and pulled out a carton of grapefruit juice.

"There'll be *hors d'oeuvres* at the party." Saying it, Ron looked away. Life around Thump had made him sensitive to the way that some words sounded so rich. Or gay. Or rich and gay. Sometimes Thump's eyes spoke of that terrible barrier between being forty and gay, and being twenty and queer. Maybe the worst part of the barrier was the way that gays hated being outside society and the way that queers angrily loved it. Anger could be such a loving thing.

All Ron could say was, "I left work early and picked up your clothes."

"Hey!" Thump put the juice away. Trapping each of his Converses under the opposite heel, Thump stepped out of them and trotted upstairs. Black Levi's, white socks, and Ron couldn't understand. Was he too old? White socks? He hunched over and picked up the shoes. They reeked of sweat and talc. Aroused by the smell, floral and bitter, Ron climbed the stairs.

Maybe he should turn on the TV in the bedroom. The Noiesni would be on CNN tonight—more often than not they were. And after the news he'd go to a party where one of them—tall and lanky—might wrap a craggy, oaken hand about his shoulders and recite the beautiful truths of the world to come, a millennial Earth without want or injustice, without greed or shame. But as he reached the upstairs hallway, Ron worried some more about Thump.

A gay party should make everything easier. Whenever Noiesni met adults of the opposite gender, a long recitation of kinship structure was mandatory. It was something they couldn't waive for humanity's sake. However it worked, it had spared the Noiesni a history of war and crime.

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Here was a people dispersed serenely among the stars because they took fifteen minutes to introduce themselves whenever they met somebody's spouse or whatever the Noiesni had. Of course, it smacked of heterosexual supremacy. It was the only reason Ron could have for disliking the Noiesni.

It had sounded so *gossipy* when Chad had told him that the dignitary didn't mind a gay party in the least. He'd merely wondered if soldiers would be present. Word had it that the military made the Noiesni uneasy.

No . . . Thump would probably manage the evening fine.

Ron entered *their* bedroom—Thump's was across the hall—and saw Thump standing naked, silk shorts in each hand, plum in the left, teal in the right. Without moving his feet, he danced with his hips and back while he hummed, *bmp, th'buh'bmp,* and played an air guitar.

He acted so straight. For decades they'd been the seraphim among lovers, those straight-acting guys . . . and now there was a whole generation of boys who were more manly than the media statesmen who'd taken the world over from Cold War Republicans. The young queer men *fought.* And the perversity of Ron's heart was perfect. Now that younger men had gotten tough, there was something delicious about the pee-cee softness of the new leaders and movie stars. Ron caught himself craving an edition of Thump with fewer rough edges, with a chiseled jaw cleanly shaven, a mouth blessed by orthodontia and the good sense never to say "fuck" in public.

Thump looked up and smiled, caught, transfixed, his dark eyes like stained glass at dusk, his teeth already stained with life.

"Shower first? Shave?" Ron asked. That stubble . . . memory again, but no, there was the party to worry about.

"Did this morning." Thump dropped the teal and stepped into the plum. Ron went over and held him, anthem of pale skin and dark hair. He tasted clean enough, but by the end of the evening his new clothes would harbor that buck scent. It was a smell that Ron sometimes craved, but not at Chad's party. Most of the guests had never met Thump. No, he didn't have much to do with Ron's friends. Whose choice was that?

As Thump slipped away and found a T-shirt in a heap next to their bed, Ron told him, "You need to wear that under a dress shirt, white or eggshell yellow."

Thump yawned and nodded, meandered out the door toward his room. As he returned, he tucked oxford cloth, starched and luminously white, into his shorts.

Ron looked away, then found himself wrapped in warmth. He turned and buried his face in Thump's shaggy hair. Holding me, Ron told himself, saying thank you with a quiet intensity nobody else has ever shown me. Ron eased Thump away, ran his finger down a nose a little too long, stared into gothic eyes.

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"What kind of snacks do Noiesni like?" Thump asked. He bounced onto the bed and scooted over for the sweater.

The last of day plated the room with gold. Ron yearned for eternity, ready never to leave this place or Thump, drawn of darkness and appetite.

Ron didn't answer. He said little after that. The night dressed them both.

Party

The Mercedes, a 380 SL that shone like a jewel, waited in the driveway. Overhead, the stars ignited an electric warmth beneath Ron's skin.

They drove downtown, then climbed back into the hills. The Mercedes took curves as sure of itself as a merry-go-round horse. A red light made it impatient. An instant before the signal blinked to green, the car jumped forward with a will of its own.

How do the Noiesni travel? wondered Ron. *The Economist* said they used a part of their "souls." Tonight, light pressed against space, expanded it, turned one place into another . . . maybe that was what a soul was really supposed to do. And maybe Thump's quiet gravity bent space just as the Noiesni did. But maybe it was an outward bending, making the world too big, increasing the loneliness that the Noiesni might ease. Maybe Thump created the same loneliness that he sometimes filled.

Full . . . empty . . . ideas that meant something else to the Noiesni. They saw the universe as an ensemble of waves, Chad said. Deriving energy from the vacuum—from nothing—they recognized how energy, and space itself, need be nothing more than mathematical sleight of hand. They had clever ways of using nothing to get anywhere. Chad had explained—and he did it so well, could make it sound so *gossipy*—how the Noiesni turned space into something akin to Fourier transforms (just as CD players did, Chad had pointed out), then used a kind of dimensional down-step conversion to turn the waves back into any region of space they cared to.

Ron hadn't minded listening to all of this. Brokers spent a lot of time listening to their clients. Homegrown psychiatrists, that's what brokers were. He had learned it was their job to handle the people and let computers handle the stocks.

The memory returned again . . . a ride to the store with his father . . . maybe it had been Saturday morning, full of chores. Saturday morning was when Ron got to be with his dad, really be *with* him. The store had even had a lunch counter.

"Think Chad'll bust out the hard liquor?" Thump picked at one of his cuticles.

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"If you don't see it out, please don't ask."

"Hey, I know how to act at parties. I go to parties all the time. Just not *your friends'*."

The tone, an outsider's, made the words ugly enough that Ron didn't know whether to argue or apologize. Thump's hurt ended the conversation. Just as he wore everything else like a man, so he wore this wound. He slouched back in his seat and grinned up at the stars flickering among the firs. Then he lolled over and watched the city flicker instead as the Mercedes climbed.

They rounded a corner and parked on cobblestone. A big house, it spoke of success as it covetously hid its view of the city. Thump vaulted over the door. It struck Ron as affected and probably wasn't good for the car.

Chad welcomed them almost as soon as they rang. Thump rapped him playfully on the shoulder and said, "Hey, bud, how yah been?" He bolted toward the right.

"Just fine." Without taking his eyes from Ron's, Chad chuckled.

Sometimes Thump was a mess.

Chad hugged Ron, slipped his jacket away from him and hung it up. Thump migrated toward the dining room, which was loaded with platters of *everything*. Tall, pear-shaped on long legs, Chad was blocking part of the view. He was older than many of the men at his party. So am I, thought Ron. One of the boys—maybe twenty and put-me-away gorgeous—was posing in black Levi's and boots. It really wasn't the right look, not tonight. Ron could hear Thump now, "Shit, all they did was pose. They could have taken up one of those rugs and danced or somethin'!" No, Thump wouldn't say that. The only time he danced with men was at mob dances, where there were women and even children and probably marimbas.

Thump danced with his bass. Or by himself, as he had when he'd dressed for the party. Maybe he *only* danced with his guitar. Sometimes it was just invisible.

Chad had Ron by the shoulder and was guiding him toward the dining room. "You're finally going to let the *rest* of the world meet him. You know it's been almost two years? You should make him come more often."

Was that a joke? Chad was one of his best friends, and he'd been over for dinner a half-dozen times since Thump had moved in. "That's not how it is. You don't think I really . . ."

Somebody Ron had never met came out of the bathroom, a man about thirty, dressing twenty and shouldn't try, but a nice haircut. He looked Ron in the eye as they were introduced, then said, "You're here with Thump? Was that Thump I just saw?"

Ron nodded.

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"I thought so. He's great. I . . . I didn't even know he was part of the family, but I figured he must be when I saw him with Young Fagabonds. I caught them everywhere before they broke up. Chad says he's with some het group now, Solid White Tuna?"

Ron nodded.

"So why'd the Fagabonds break up?"

"I don't know." But he did. Thump had left the group because they were too campy. Campy was a barrier, Thump said, a barrier that let people hate each other and themselves while they laughed, a barrier that helped scientists who looked for genes get crooked, lousy grants.

Thump was naïve. He didn't realize that barriers let you be *inside*, too, and that sometimes you had to be inside to survive.

The guy shook his nice haircut as he slipped away.

It hurt. He'd been hiding Thump. From these people who mattered? From himself?

Ron stood at the end of the long dining room. It had two small chandeliers, hardwood floors and paneled walls, a phalanx of French doors that opened onto the city sparkling below.

He stared. The Noiesni dignitary appeared to be conversing with Thump and a young Asian woman. In one hand Thump held a large glass of milk; in the other, a napkin heaped with crackers and salami. Of course he hadn't asked for scotch—he'd been warned—but he'd gone ahead and asked for *milk*. He stood there gawking at the Noiesni and sipping on milk while he juggled salami, so that he didn't even have a free hand to wipe his mouth with.

Breathe deep, Ron warned himself as he edged toward the trio. Then it struck him that maybe nobody even noticed Thump. Maybe they all were looking at the Noiesni. He wasn't really that tall, six-four at most. It was the gauntness that must make them look taller on CNN. Not gawky, but graceful, and there was the craggy face, almost hideous, yet eyes so young; Ron could imagine the Noiesni in shorts instead of his suit, playing basketball with college freshmen, though the color was ghastly, like somebody with hepatitis and a fever.

The Asian was saying, "My mother and father arrived in Hong Kong in '72. They did well enough to leave in '91. They and my grandparents live in Vancouver now, but my older brother was already in Sydney. Have you ever been to Sydney, Mr. Sh'tka'heh?" She said it perfectly, like a nanosecond's worth of sand flowing through an hourglass.

"Not Sydney, no." Sh'tka'heh glanced at Thump and smiled. "This is Sarah Dinh. Her mother's name is Ruth. Shall I begin the introduction?"

His eyes were as dark as Thump's, those alien sclera white as snow, like porcelain so thin it became blue. There were light-years of gentleness in those eyes, and they warmed as the boy that Ron loved stuffed salami in his mouth before he said, "My name's Thump. Nice to meet you,

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Sarah." So proud of what he took for quintessential polish, he nodded since his hands were full.

Chad hastened around the table. If Thump and Ms. Dinh let themselves get engaged in Noiesni formalities, the dignitary would be tied up for half the evening.

Ms. Dinh read the cue perfectly, as if already looking for an excuse to get away. "Sarah," Chad almost sang, "I don't know which wine to cork first. Could you help?" She must work for Zenoquint. The exchange was as sterile as anything in a board room, as safe and urbane. Sarah Dinh escaped with Chad while the Noiesni stretched his mouth in a long, pained frown.

Ron saw dismay in the alien eyes. Thump's back was to everybody except the Noiesni, who regained his composure and began to listen eagerly while Thump rambled, "My dad had his own garbage truck, but he got killed when I was three, not on the job or anything, so there wasn't any insurance money, it was a motocross accident, y'know, like that, and I never met my grandma, not on that side, because she lived in Iowa, but Ryan, he's my older brother . . ."

Ron backed away, turned, looked at the guests in the living room, and beyond that, in the library. These people were his friends, but you didn't get invited just because you were a friend. You had to be *in* or you wound up alone, and you had to respect what you had to do to be in. Look at Harry—God, put me away, Harry was such a doll, and he knew how to act—they're all staring at me, and I've got to get to the kitchen. People let down in the kitchen . . .

"Are you okay, Ron?"

Chad had his arm around him, knowingly ushered him toward the kitchen, countertops aglow, boy in the boots slouching in the doorway, black cutout against blinding white.

"I'm sorry, Chad."

"What for?" Chad offered him half a beer with a gesture stiff as the words.

"Thump, the way he's crowding the Noiesni. I guess he's . . . he's such a mess. I know it." It came out in polite, dying tones. Maybe Chad could forgive them.

"Sh'tka'heh kind of crowded *him*. He heard there was going to be a musician and was looking forward to it."

Ron hoped there was a reprieve in those words. "Thump's not a *musician*. He just plays in those bands."

Chad munched a corn chip. The nice food was in the dining room. Here were the chips, lots of beer, diet soda. "I bet as many people came to meet Thump as Sh'tka'heh. The Noiesni aren't news anymore." Chad grinned—for an instant it was a mouth uglier than the Noiesni's—and opened another beer for himself. "You two aren't breaking up, are you? I

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mean, Thump's so *Guess?!*" Chad's face lit up with one of those flattering, leering grins that wasn't a joke, not at all. Did Chad want a boy? Or did he just want to get even?

Hank lounged next to the sink. He was leaner than Ron, skinnier than everybody, even if he really was negative. He hung on every word. Such a cunt, and a mean one, too, why had he and Chad been friends forever? "We're not breaking up! Of course not." Ron wanted everybody to hear that. But we should be, because if we aren't, I'm not going to be invited back . . . right, Hank? Ron felt like he was staggering. Maybe he should go back into the dining room. That door over there, if he walked through it he'd be back, and he wouldn't have to go down the hallway. That door could bend space as the Noiesni could, spare him light-years of humiliation.

"Tell Thump I'm sorry about the milk." Hank sounded so earnest.

Ron turned halfway. "He *has* milk. He could've had beer. Six days out of seven he's drinking by noon anyway."

Hank loved that. "It's a party, Ron." He glanced down and closed his eyes in an I'm-worried-about-you-both way. "He asked for *chocolate* milk, but Chad doesn't have any. Tell him I'm sorry."

"Don't be ridiculous."

Ron stumbled as he reentered the dining room. Sh'tka'heh leaned against one of the French doors and glanced over his shoulder. "Are you all right? I've barely gotten used to the gravity myself."

Was that a stupid Noiesni joke followed by a stupid Noiesni smile? Sh'tka'heh extended his hand, as if Ron needed it. The hideously long brownish fingers looked like twigs or sick, ropey turds, and with extra joints. Thumb in the wrong place, on the inside of the hand instead of the outside.

Ron smiled as if the Noiesni had a million dollar account. "Maybe Chad *should* turn down the gravity. I bet you could show him how."

The Noiesni's teeth were as white as his sclera, ten times whiter than Thump's. Sh'tka'heh turned back toward Thump and resumed:

"In the Seventeenth Epoch, when my foremother had resettled in one of the Great Colonies, she met my forefather, who wouldn't summon life until the Epochs changed, so he was actually the first of the Sh'tka'heh Lineage in the Eighteenth; their firstborn was of course required to migrate between Empires, but before he left—something of a prodigy—he'd taken awards as a wavemaster. He composed and navigated splendidly, outstripping almost everyone in both crafts. It was his discovery of normalization through triadic singularities that allowed some of the earliest extra-galactic exploration. Of course, it wasn't until the Twenty-seventh Epoch that settlement began outside our own galaxy here. We admit that the family's real achievement in the Eighteenth wasn't in our Empire. But the History is part of our Lineage. Lineage really does count more

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than Empire, don't you think?" The Noiesni grinned in reply to his own question, so Thump grinned, too. Chatter about Epochs and Lineages rattled on.

Ron edged away so that the table was between him and the extraterrestrial.

"Thank God I didn't have to listen to all that."

He looked to his left. Ms. Dinh smeared Camembert on a cracker. "The Noiesni are currently in their Forty-second Epoch. Are you with the man there? I hope he's wearing comfortable shoes, because Sh'tka'heh has twenty-four Epochs to go." Ron saw that she wouldn't mind being the first to leave tonight. Glancing down at the crackers again, she whispered, "I've never seen the Noiesni go overboard like that even for somebody of the *opposite* sex. You'd better watch out. I thought he was just an alien, but maybe he's gay." She bit her lower lip and started to leave the room. Pausing, she looked over her shoulder. "Actually, it can't go on forever. Sh'tka'heh has a breakfast meeting with the Pope. At the Vatican. He'll be out of here by midnight." She left the room.

A woman, probably straight—and human—she was *outside* and she hurt. Who to blame? The Noiesni?

Or Thump?

"Well, yeah," Thump was saying, "I got my first bass when I was eleven. You gotta be at least five feet tall to reach." His left arm stretched off to the side, salami flopping in the air. "And in grade school, that was before we left The Dalles, we had a band, and I had a dogshit amp until I was fourteen . . . I mean, it wasn't even a bass amp, so it rolled off real *bad!*" He grabbed another handful of salami, offered Sh'tka'heh a piece. "Did I hear you're looking at Zenoquint's chips so you guys can help us build a better rocket? That's great, but do you get any, like, royalties or anything? Royalties are kind of important, y'know."

Sh'tka'heh took a slice of salami between his second and third fingers—or third and fourth, who could tell? His thumb was on *backward.* "We've made no design commitments at all. But the bass you play, this interests me more."

The room had grown too quiet. There was a conspicuous absence of people at the table, though several lingered in the doorways. As Chad glided up, Ron wanted to die.

"Sh'tka'heh gets this way out at Zeno . . . especially in the fab. The way we do things fascinates him. I hope he's not making Thump *uncomfortable.*"

Ms. Dinh might be right. Maybe Sh'tka'heh *was* trying to impress Thump. The alien continued, "Fundamental pitch can be equated to a monochord strung between the inflationary moment and the ultimate event horizon. From this the harmonic divisions of strings in ten-space can be derived. So, mankind isn't barking totally up the wrong tree. But

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you need more 'music' and fewer numbers. Once the modalities of energy-matter condensation are determined, supra-luminal travel can be equated to polyphony, the harmonies equating to dimensions. But no one can show you the equations. Implosion at key navigational points has to happen in accord with *your* neurophysiology and nobody else's."

"The stars are frets, but you gotta know the tune to get there?" Thump said with a nod.

"More or less." Sh'tka'heh visibly relaxed, and those grotesque fingers interlaced. He was at ease now. Someone understood. The two of them were *inside,* and only the two of them.

Thump, nodding . . . no, it was more than that. It was another little dance shimmying up his butt and his back. Ron saw it, *thuh-banh-bmp, thuh-b'b'banh-bp!* Thump's thumb twitched.

An alien, Ron wanted to yell, an alien's ruining a party given in his honor, and Thump *understands* him. After ten minutes, he understands this freak like he's never understood me. No, I'm just a fag, and nobody *needs* to understand me. I can't build spaceships, I can't end hunger and injustice, but I *don't* waste my life playing a guitar, either.

The anger made it easier to hear the Noiesni blather softly on, "like a song . . . like a poem . . . and in a moment, between Canopus and Vega, you dream the summits of a thousand dreams; from Rigel to Altair you swing by an invisible cord, and the chords you hear heal the demon-dark emptiness, fill it with nebulae and light more subtle . . ."

And Thump, smiling, interrupted him, "and your foot on a fuzz box that makes your room scream like an empty parkin' garage, you fall and fall and fall until your life's hangin' from one note . . ."

From his pocket Sh'tka'heh cautiously pulled what looked like a debit card, but as crystalline as the chandelier. He toyed with it for a few moments. "It looks like a suitable waveform is only thirty or forty light-years away; I'm sure we dubbed it on the way in . . . a bass, yes, is this a good one?"

Another chandelier's worth of light appeared and floated between Thump and the French doors. It coalesced; the gleam transmuted into solid curves, black and lustrous; sparks spun away into a blond neck; light became a surf of chrome.

Ron watched as Thump moaned audibly and ran his hand over the sapphire-blue pickguard. "Fender Jazz, '62 . . . fff-*uh*-ck, it's not a reissue? Where'd you get this? Is it *yours?*" Thump lifted the instrument out of the air and offered it to Sh'tka'heh, but only after he'd cradled it close to himself, wood and metal in the image of child or true love.

"The instrument is a song in and of itself. It still exists as light, light-years away from here." Sh'tka'heh took the instrument. His thumb wrapped around the neck closer to the guitar body than the rest of his fingers. "Care to step outside?"

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Thump's hand weighed against a latch. As he swung the French door open he asked, "What are we gonna plug into?"

Sh'tka'heh grinned. "We'll rig up something."

The glint in his eyes frightened Ron. He'd seen it before, in Thump's face, and until now he'd assumed it was just the rapture of the weak, of people who could afford to commit slow suicide in crummy apartments and bad jobs.

They closed the door. The house was silent except for soft and vapid music. Ron turned around to face the catastrophe.

Chad sat on the arm of a couch and wouldn't raise his head. Ms. Dinh was gone. The crowd was too thin. This wasn't pique or boredom—a lot of fear in these men. In a beautiful home on a wonderful night, they were suddenly outside. It was fear like being a boy in a locker room, quiet while everybody else talked about girls. Girls were music, and Ron had never understood. Tonight Thump and the Noiesni had the music.

Chad still wouldn't look at him. The party was a horror show. With that sly wanting-a-glass-of-milk rudeness, Thump had burned everybody.

An eerie glow shone through the windows.

"Thump!" Ron cried aloud. He lunged through the dining room, grabbed the door latch and rattled glass, fought to get outside.

City below, stars above, and between them blazed a huge opal where the swimming pool had been. Maybe it was one of the knots into which the Noiesni could tie space. It seemed as private as a first kiss. They were in there, conspirators, *both* of them aliens.

Betrayed and angry, Ron stepped in, too.

Too fine for words. The stars shone, while city and river glistened far below. Twinkling, the pool had become an immense amplifier, sonorous with *wonder* as Sh'tka'heh played the Fender, strap slung elegantly over his gawky shoulder, thumb reaching around and touching the E-string deftly far up the neck.

As slinky as blues, as stately as Bach, the music traveled far away, accompanied by the slow-breathing woods, by the snare-stars that whispered like silver sand poured on the drum of the night sky.

Thump shuffled back and forth, danced for himself, rapt, his fingers twitching, his jaw sometimes working as if he meant to sing the song that the Noiesni played.

The tune went someplace that Ron could never go. Once he could have headed in that direction . . . two years ago when Thump had come home too late, so unfairly late, tugging Ron from sleep, urging him to rest his head on a chest warm from a night's music. Ron had always chosen to sleep instead, curled around his pillow, but yearning angrily for Thump's chest, his wide grip, yearning even though it was all right there. He'd been angry because a man couldn't be in two places at once, and Thump

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chose to come home *too late,* always had to be elsewhere just to be Thump.

Tonight a man could be in two places at one time, or a thousand, romping the summit of every dream between here and the Pole Star, playing bass chords on the Pleiades, hammering harmonics out of Arcturus, falling into Spica's lap, drunk because a man didn't need to fear dying or fear losing Thump . . . maybe because he was already lost.

Th'b'b'banh! Thump danced.

Sh'tka'heh paused, the stars keeping time, slipped the guitar strap off his shoulder and draped it over Thump's head. Ron had never seen Thump so suddenly still and full of love. It showed in the downward tilt of his chin, the way he braced the Fender against his hip, stance hesitant for an instant before he received the weight and took command.

There was respect in the way that Thump grinned at Sh'tka'heh as he started to pluck a sassy backbeat and threw the starry snares into syncopation. He nabbed a little riff out of the air and juggled it between octaves.

It had none of the majesty of Sh'tka'heh's song.

But it was happy, sure, complete. Thump danced the only way he really could, not in his feet or legs, just in his hips and shoulders. His music disappeared amid the stars and nebulae, hid behind Seyfert galaxies with their laughter, became a pulse that played hilariously, then caressed like a hand in the darkness, and plunged back to this world as the Earth began to sing.

Ron closed his eyes and tried to retreat from the glow. It was such a sad song underneath the humor, full of loss that got buried when people died, full of hurt that the the world hid inside herself so that the future could still hope. And Thump made it unbearably beautiful as he jostled Earth with his rhythm.

Ron had felt that rhythm inside him and never understood. Now he recoiled back into the certainty of a French door, yanked it open, blinked beneath the chandeliers.

Chad sat alone at the long table. He diverted his eyes from Ron, looked fearfully at the glow instead, then grabbed a carrot stick and speared it into dip. When he finally swallowed he said, "I guess they get this way, the Noiesni."

"I'm sorry." How did you get forgiven for wrecking a party where miracles were implied, if not quite real? He could throw away his pride . . . could throw almost anything away to make his host accept this apology. There were lovers, even startlingly rare ones, but then there were your friends.

Chad ate another carrot, no dip this time. "I think Thump made Sh'tka'heh homesick. How?"

"Sorry," Ron whispered again. He headed for the hallway so he could grab his jacket and leave.

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Chad called out, "What about Thump?"

Ron got the coat. Going to the door, he muttered, "Call you tomorrow?"

"If Thump gets out of there, he has a place to stay . . . tonight."

Ron pulled the door shut and stood on the porch, desolate. Sure, Thump was still good for one thing . . . tonight. Ron checked his watch. It was almost eleven. Where had the time gone?

He drove home, reckless, heater on high, October air as sharp as the city against the dark. Sometimes the wind carried a scent, earthy like Thump and his clothes. The smell became tainted decades, sex, and *love* that would destroy your soul if not your body. He pulled into the driveway and triggered the garage door.

Cold, he hurried in, slammed against the cutting block as he rushed across the kitchen to switch on the light, turn up the heat. He smelled Thump, as if his feet had stunk up the entire house. Almost choking, he tumbled into the hallway and onto the stairs. Huddled, he gasped, wondered if he'd have to burn everything to get rid of that stench.

Bright kitchen light bounced from copper pans, wrapped sedately about the banisters; be quiet, Ron heard the light say, there'll be other boys, other smells. And it came to him, the rich odor of the leather couch in the living room, the furniture polish in the dining room, the stirring of old summer dust as the heater kicked on . . . the familiar smells of aloneness.

As long as you loved nobody, it was easy to be brave when you were alone.

Sound

The clock standing at the end of the living room chimed midnight. He'd sat on the steps all that time, knees in his chest, arms on his knees, face buried between his arms.

How much life could one memory shape? And such a small memory . . . Ron's dad had bought some groceries. Afterward they'd stopped at the lunch counter for a milk shake. Sun gleamed on the cars, on the window behind the waitress. The milk shakes, plain vanilla, were worth more than every treasure in the world.

Almost finished, Ron was playing around and spilled the last of his. But Dad reached over and ran a hand through Ron's hair while the waitress wiped up the little spill.

"Don't worry," his dad told him.

And Ron began to cry. His dad lifted him up and hugged him. Stubble burned his cheek and he cried even harder. Dad understood, hugged him more gently this time, kissed his temple . . .

"Hey, Ron?" Thump whispered.

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He looked up, blinked in the shadowy hallway. "I didn't hear the door." The words rasped out.

"I didn't come in through the door. Sh'tka'heh gave me a lift." He grinned. "You should've waited, then you could've come, too. The car could have sat till tomorrow. Nobody'll fuck with it in *that* neighborhood."

"Why do you talk like that?" The face he had loved a couple of hours ago disgusted him.

"Why not?" Thump sat down next to him on the steps. "Hey, I was so proud of you when you came in to hear me and Sh'tka'heh jam. Kind of scary, right?" Thump put his arm around him.

Ron pushed Thump away, got up, turned at the foot of the stairs. "Why can't you act normal? Why can't you *just act normal*?"

Thump rose slowly. "Hey . . . sorry. I only stopped by to change. This sweater's great, but it's hard to play in, especially with the shirt. Sorta too hot, y'know? Anyway, I gotta go." He started up the stairs.

"Where? It's after midnight."

He didn't stop, didn't even look back.

Ron waited. He circled through the house, turned on every light in the living room, hallway, dining room, then stationed himself back at the foot of the stairs.

When Thump came down, he wore rust-colored Levi's and a T-shirt. He gripped his suede jacket hard as he edged by. The back of the tee said "*Einstürzende Neubauten.*" Somebody had given it to him when he and the Prague-Matics had gone to Amsterdam. Probably some trick.

Without moving, Ron listened to footsteps on the basement stairs. A minute later Thump came back into the hallway, his guitar case in one hand and the jacket in the other. The shitty boots were on his feet untied. He stood in front of the door, hip-slung and shoulders concave. His cowlicks stuck out the way they did when he'd been playing hard, impossibly cute and a little forlorn, the way that bad haircuts always were.

"Sorry about tonight . . . I guess. I mean, if I fucked up, I'm sorry. I got to go, Ron."

"Where?"

"I . . . love you, Ron." Thump looked up. His eyes burned with love, but not for anybody or anything human.

"Where?"

"Out to the island. I gotta see the cows."

"Oh, *come on!* With your *guitar?*"

"Me and Sh'tka'heh. It's the only place I could think of with lots of room. We're gonna need it." Thump suddenly beamed like he had at the party. "Hey, maybe the cows'll like it!" The smile faded. "You . . . you can come, too, if you want."

"Sh'tka'heh's meeting with the Pope."

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"He cancelled. C'mon?" Thump grinned, raised his brows. As they settled, he winked. "C'mon."

"You're not going anyplace." Ron folded his arms. Why am I doing that? he asked himself. I never do that . . . but my father did. Did every man, even a gay one, have to become his father? Arms unfolded. "You're coming to bed."

"See you later." Thump stepped backward toward the door, accidentally drove his case into it.

"Watch it! *Watch it!*"

"Sh'tka'heh wants to listen to me some more." Thump swung the case upright and leaned against it. "He says that he heard something tonight that makes him think there's hope for us after all."

"What *hope?* Who needs *hope?* They're fixing things. Now come to bed."

"You're wrong."

Ron saw it, and almost burst with a winner's glee. A tremor in Thump, like fatigue or fear. "No, *you're* wrong. If you leave, you don't need to come back. Not tomorrow. Not ever." Oh, yes, that did it. Thump missed a beat, two, three. A bass player, and *he'd lost count!*

He slumped against the case and stared at the floor. "The Noiesni aren't fixing anything. They're just looking around trying to figure out when we're finally going to snuff ourselves. They've never seen it before, people as destructive as us. Greed and judgment and hate everywhere. But they love us." Thump looked up and found half a grin. "Maybe they can't help us, but they love us, so they're not going to run away sooner than they need to. But I'm gonna prove to 'em tonight that maybe them *and us* can find a way for them to help." He finally drew a deep, easy breath, let it out through his nose.

He smiled as if he'd just remembered something he'd been grasping at for a lifetime, then he spoke again, more softly than before, "Sh'tka'heh says we're losers, that the whole fuckin' world has started to lose, and now it wants to keep on losing because it's easier that way. When we lose, he says, we've only got to lose once, then we know we've lost and we can quit. But when we're winning, every day's a risk, because we've got to keep winning all over again, every day. They—the Noiesni—have been around longer than us, and that means they've been risking it a lot longer, too. We ought to listen, like they do."

Thump's eyes had that loving, respectful look again. "Movement, they hear it all. When the sun comes up, they hear it. The world's rotation, its revolution, the precision . . . no, the *precession* . . . Sh'tka'heh showed me how to hear a little bit more, and I'm gonna play the dawn and show him we're not losers."

Something loud filled Ron's head. It wasn't music. It was like fire crackling so that he didn't have to hear anymore. "You think *you're* going to be front man for the world?" Ron brought his hands together as if he

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meant to applaud. "The only reason you're even in a band is so you can stand around and make other guys look good."

Thump's eyes lost their gleam. He'd taken the blow. "No, Ron. I play bass. The sun's in front . . . the morning and the sun. I'm just gonna make them more beautiful than they are. It's time." He pulled keys out of his pocket. "I'd better go."

"Isn't your alien going to pick you up? And shouldn't you *tie your shoes?*"

It hit. Thump's upper lip tightened as he narrowed his eyes. "Lay off, Ron. I wanted to say good night, okay? He'll find me easy enough, but I gotta go."

"Not in one of my cars."

"I'll take the Pontiac, okay?"

Ron reached for the keys and Thump jerked them away. The two of them stood no more than a foot apart. "Give me the keys. And the keys to the house. If you're not going to stay here tonight, then you're not going to stay, period. Get your shit out of here." He grabbed for the keys again, got blocked by Thump's shoulder.

"I'll take a cab. I'm sorry, Ron."

"Where are going to call one? You're not using my phone. You're out of here."

"There's a phone down the street on Westover. See you in the morning." Thump reached for the doorknob.

Ron grabbed him, felt the biceps flex beneath his hand. His hatred swelled like that muscle. "Get your shit out of my house."

"This is where I live." Soft words, but they pled nothing except the truth.

"Get your shit out of here or I'll throw it out."

"There's laws, Ron." His smile said: Stop now and I'll forgive you.

How had he stained his teeth so badly by the time he was only twenty-five? Except they'd looked every bit as bad two years ago. They were just crummy teeth. "Laws? Show me a rent receipt. You were a guest. Now you're out of here. Do you understand? Get *out of here.*"

He kicked the guitar case. It skidded across the hall. Thump fell as he lunged after it. He hit the floor and sent a shockwave through the house. He moaned and sat up to pull on the jacket, worked his splayed legs back underneath him.

Ron stood over him. God, there was so much power in making a man cry, but then you had to *watch* it, tears devastating in their subtlety. Ron had never seen Thump cry before. It was harsh in its stillness. The hurt came and went in a blink, a swallowed sob. An eye shimmered like the dark body of Sh'tka'heh's guitar, and that light got ground away with a fist.

And Ron rode his own tumbling heart downward. A man's tears were

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the death of an innocence, and he wanted to feed on this instant, a part of Thump dead. The only soul worth owning was the one that hadn't been destroyed yet, but nobody could own that kind of soul, so Ron had to destroy it after all.

With his left arm Thump drew the guitar case near; he still tried to get up.

Ron bent over him.

Thump drove an elbow into his stomach.

He staggered back. Can't breathe, his ribs shrieked, but I smell your jacket . . . Thump's shoulder hammered him against the doorjamb, pinned him there with chin raked back so he still couldn't breathe. His pulse sizzled; there could have been other boys here tonight, why this one?

Thump's low voice pounded thick in his ear, like a slurred serenade, "Don't ever kick my guitar again. Don't ever." The words spelled the death of an old universe. "Why? You're making it harder . . . why d'you want to make it harder?" Thump backed off.

Ron lurched into the kitchen and grabbed the phone. He poked at the 9.

Thump stood in the doorway.

Ron tapped 1, punched it again. "Police. I need to report an assault and an auto theft."

Thump turned and left.

The police would act as if it were a joke. He hung up, because the police wouldn't treat him like a person, wouldn't treat him like a man.

"Thump!" Ron yelled.

The front door closed. He rushed toward it, stomach and chest aching. He still couldn't breathe, almost hit himself in the face when he yanked open the door.

The porch light was off.

The clarity of the night could eat a soul alive. A breeze told the aspens obscene stories about the death of wonderful things. Thump disappeared down the hill. I'm sorry, Ron wanted to scream, I don't know what's wrong, God, I'm so stupid. Thump, I'm sorry . . . but his lips couldn't open, his larynx was sutured shut by those threads of starlight. And no loud arguments in the middle of the night, please, not in this neighborhood. No, the autumn or childhood or morning or the sun can't make me yell that I'm sorry.

Because I'm not.

Because you're a loser, Thump. You *are* outside. It's *my* world, Thump.

And the world is a dead place . . . as dead as the flesh you left here when you wouldn't scrape it away with your stubble, dark as the night, sharp as the stars.

Sh'tka'heh, play him into the ground, bury him with your twisted, backward hands. Please. Please let the world stay a dead place. ●

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Rebecca Ore

SCAREY ROSE IN DEEP HISTORY

Rebecca Ore has published seven novels since 1988. The latest, *Gaia's Toys*, has just come out in trade paperback from Tor Books. Her last story for *Asimov's*, "Hypocaust & Baythesphere" (January 1995), was a time travel story set in medieval England. In her newest tale, Ms. Ore peers deep into America's own past to reveal some complex and unsettling secrets.

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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"History should not be ancestor worship," Sarey Rose told them as she brought in the last of the time-viewer components and began to calculate how to form the microgates big enough for past light. Her hair was bound up for work. Whether or not she approved of the target, she was working.

"We need to see our ancestors as people," Peter said. Wearing his family reunion T-shirt, he sat down in one of the reproduction chairs in the plantation house. Mulatto wasn't a word that was used much these days, but Peter was significantly mulatto. His great-grandfather had owned his great-grandmother. The modern day family reunions included both sets of kin. So liberal, Sarey Rose thought, and such a neat way to avoid poor white trash. Now, he and his white half-kin had finagled use of the time-viewer to get back to the primal event. "After all, we're all from here. And we're pretty typical."

"Who is this *us?*" Sarey Rose said. "I'm one of those people whose promised land was always the future. When the old regime fell, we rose like rockets. Typical wasn't planters and their children."

"But you are in on this project."

"I would have rather taken a look at Tom Paine or Heisenberg."

Sarey Rose thought that using the time-viewer for Deep River wasted both her time and the money invested in the equipment. But the engineering department needed the history department to get funding, so here it was. Sarey thought that the history department, along with all other liberal arts departments, provided a refuge for upper-class twits who couldn't master calculus and feared computers.

Peter said, "The only way we can really escape the past is to understand it."

Martha, a brown-haired woman who always wore either suits or paint-stained jeans, came in and scowled. Probably she hated the two of them talking about "her" project when she wasn't around. Martha also seemed surprised each time she saw Sarey Rose, the way a cat periodically seems surprised to realize that its human companion is a very large animal. Sarey Rose knew that if she'd been homely, in glasses, Martha would have been happier. Her image of Sarey didn't fit the unruly reality. Scary Rose, the boys in high school used to call her, the girl who should have left the technology to them. Only *ugly* girls needed high-tech skills to compensate, the son of the high school science teacher told her. Two weeks later, Sarey blew up the toilets in the teachers' bathroom. The principal couldn't believe that a girl did it. Sarey's classmates knew better.

About three decades earlier, Martha's father finished his Ph.D. in classics on the last money from plantation acreage and never came back. Martha said, "Rose, are we ready?"

"Tractor beams holding the past, ready to beam up March 12, 1853, Captain."

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"Rose, I know that tractor beams are physically impossible."

"Last week, then, were you being awful polite about my techno-babble?" But now Martha pretended she'd never fallen for the gobbledygook explanation. Sarey thought she'd omit asking Martha if she'd known better when she'd nodded sagely *last* week. No point in goading a High Wasp Queen. Oh, plenty of point, but after a while, the glaze of politeness and double-speak made a woman feel like she was walking in molasses.

Peter said, "We're going to focus on the main bedroom, my great-grandmother's cabin, and the front parlor. We all know what went on."

Sarey Rose said, "I doubt it was all as neat as the family legends say. I'd like another two sites."

Martha said, "You're not an historian."

"My people have their traditions, too."

Peter said, "I thought you didn't care about your own past?"

"I *don't* care, personally, but if you are trying to get a picture of this time, we need other sites besides two plantation rooms and a slave cabin. I know enough history to know *that!*"

Peter said, "Wouldn't it be okay to start with these, then find two more sites based on what we hear from our first three sites?"

Martha looked like she wanted to argue, but her white liberalness forced her to nod to her second-half-cousin-several-times-removed. Sarey wondered if Peter's great-grandmother got fucked by her owner because she was equally too diplomatic.

Individual glass fibers penetrated to three spaces in March 12, 1853. Screen one in the parlor cleared, showing a black woman dusting the mantel with a feather duster. On screen two, Sarey saw the newer version of one of the big beds in the present-day restored plantation house. Then the slave hut appeared. It looked rather good for a slave hut, containing a wooden dresser with a tortoise shell brush and a necklace of turquoise beads on it. Martha said, "He gave her my great-grandmother's beads, but we must have gotten them back."

Peter didn't speak, just moved closer to the screen, looking at the cabin's wood floor, two silk dresses, one purple, the other bright yellow, hanging from wall pegs, the bedstead with a feather bed and woven rope mattress support. "Bed cords! We'd always heard she tried to put him off. That he forced her."

Sarey Rose sighed. "Now, we need a fourth site."

"Do you have the capacity?" Martha asked.

"We can go in next door for a quick look around, then re-site to one of the main targets. Another slave cabin would give us a comparison."

"If you can do it quickly," Martha said.

Sarey Rose pulled from the master bedroom into another slave cabin. The floor there was dirt, the bed a lumpy mattress like a giant pillow on a rough wicker frame, rather like Iroquois beds.

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Peter said, "Shit! She sure did have it better."

Sarey Rose said, "Maybe he was bribing her not to poison him in his sleep?" She looked back at Peter's ancestral cabin.

Martha said again, "She's got my great-grandmother's beads."

Sarey Rose leaned back and said, "Do you want to know all the way, or should I find us other places that would be less emotionally stressful to view?" Knowing the high WASPs and their kin as she did, Sarey figured that saying that would lock them here. She hoped their eyeballs would blister. In a metaphorical way.

On the parlor screen, the woman dusting looked up as a white woman in her forties came into the room. The picture was somewhat grainy. Sarey Rose wanted to reach in and touch the feathers, the ashes, the crocheted bedcover—linen, cotton? Inquiring primate fingers wanted to know.

"What would it look like without the computer enhancement?" Martha asked.

Sarey said, "We have a tiny fan of optic fibers that moves. We're copying the raw data stream, but the computer is enhancing the screens. If we saw a zebra, we might get a horse, but then we never see completely what's out there, anyway. The brain *always* interprets. The resolution should pick up as the program picks up new data." She put the master bedroom back on the third screen.

In 1853, the white woman spoke to the black woman. The computer threw up a small window in clearer pixels of Martha's great-great-grandmother.

"Could she be anyone else?" Martha asked.

"She's acting like she owns the other woman," Sarey Rose said. She keyed the computer to provisionally accept the earlier scan of a photo of the white woman. The image sharpened.

Then the black woman became clearer.

"What happened?" Martha asked.

"The machine learned how to see them," Sarey said.

"She looks like an aunt of mine," Peter said.

Sarey Rose leaned back, wishing they could hear back to 1853, but sound waves were too big to pass though the tiny gates. The white woman left the room. The black woman crossed her eyes, shook the duster hard, really banging it against the hearth. She seemed to be giggling. Then she brushed her face with the feather duster, leaving nothing on the skin, then there was a faint whitening as the computer figured out that the data the quivering glass fibers fed it wasn't noise.

"So she looks like she's been working," Peter explained.

In the master bedroom, the white woman lay across her bed, one hand over her eyes. The black woman disappeared from the downstairs parlor, reappeared at the bedroom door. The computer sharpened the images as

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Sarey keyed in that the women in this scene were the same as the women in the parlor screen.

Martha said, "We'll have a lip reader check this, but I think that the black woman . . ."

"Alice," Peter said.

". . . is asking the white woman, my ancestor Ann, if she'd free her."

Sarey Rose said, "Will she free her?"

"Well, the war . . ."

"No, Alice is asking if Ann will free her. Did your ancestor leave a will freeing his slaves?"

Martha said, "No."

Sarey Rose said, "So he lied."

Martha said, "How can you infer that from such a tentative question?"

Peter said, "We always heard that the master promised to free Alice and his children with her, but the mistress crossed him."

Martha said, "My family knew that manumitted slaves had terrible lives, so we kept them, never sold them, buried them in the family cemetery."

"Your people sold *one,*" Peter said, before Sarey could.

"Your people hated him. We sold him to make *your* people happy."

"I'd like to remind everyone that family traditions are unreliable historical sources unless verified by corroborating evidence, like a manuscript will, court records, letters with good provenance. . . ."

"Thank you, Sarey Rose," Martha said. "I know that. That's why we're *looking.*"

A man came in to the parlor downstairs. The computer sketched him in. Sarey Rose thought that he must be the master of the house. He wore riding boots, and gloves that the computer, after some dithering, painted with marks made by reins. Sarey Rose called up a photo of the house's founder. The computer tried those features, but threw a query: IS TINT ABSOLUTE?

Sarey typed: NO.

The computer jiggled the man's features and came up with slightly wider cheekbones and nose than the photo showed, darker skin. Sarey said, "We always said the old man didn't look pure white. What were your family traditions on *that,* Martha?"

"We're not racist," Martha said.

"Hey, I'm not either," Sarey Rose said. "But I always wondered why your people just showed up about 1809 without any big lies about your Tidewater kin and their English lord kin."

Martha said, "If you're having trouble with that, it's your own bigotry that's showing."

Peter didn't answer. He was staring at the man who disappeared. Then, in the time it took to walk the hall and go up the staircase to the big upstairs room, he came into the bedroom. The two women froze,

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cringing, Sarey Rose would guess. Ann spoke. The angle of her face made lip reading impossible. *Did you really promise to free this bitch? Can we sell her? If you can have a slave lover, can you buy me a nice white-looking likely boy?* Was she saying something like that? They could never know for sure. Sarey Rose said, "Even if we could get something as big as a sound wave through a micro wormhole, we'd still never know what they were *thinking*."

"Flint could have been a Cherokee name," Martha said. "We thought it was just his nickname."

Flint seemed amused. He spoke. The black woman left the room. The white woman sat on the bed, not looking at him. He took her by the chin. Again, no way to tell what he said. *You're the mother of my children, but she is, too, so try to get along? You're my white bride who'll make our children look even more proper? Without you and your family connections, someone might wonder about me? Men prosper the more they get laid, so get over it, bitch?*

Ann turned her face. The lips seemed to say, *So, you just tell her that to keep her happy.*

Flint nodded.

Men, Ann's lips said.

He must have asked her what she wanted, because Ann seemed to say, *a diamond brooch.*

Flint grunted and sat down. The black woman came back with a glass full of clear liquid. Flint sat down in a chair and let the black woman pull his boots off. Ann sat on the bed staring out the window.

Flint smiled at both of them.

Peter said, "Her name was Alice. He lied to her, didn't he? Son-of-a-bitch wasn't even pure white."

Martha said, "Cherokee women wouldn't have let one of their men get away with adultery without him getting mobbed by his wife's clanswomen. If he were part Cherokee, having access to more than one woman must have been male heaven."

Sarey Rose said, "You're not surprised that he looks like this?"

"We've wondered. One of the photos we have of him looks like it was retouched. A tintype. When we did a book on the family, we reproduced a copy of the tintype. But, no, I'm not real surprised. Again, I'm not bigoted, am I, Cousin Peter."

Peter said, "Could this be a history that doesn't lead to ours?"

"We can theorize alternative histories. We can't theorize a way to *get* to them," Sarey Rose said. She wondered if she was a bigot. So some non-Anglo—octoroon, mestizo—slipped across the Virignia color bar before it became so rigid. Did it matter? Even in the most moralistic of times, the 1950s, 10 percent of all married women gave their husbands other men's children.

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"Just leave it on to record," Martha said. "Or do you have to constantly monitor it?"

Sarey Rose wondered if Martha thought that she massaged the data to get images she liked. "I can leave it on. The computer has samples of the family photographs."

"Was your kinsman working for us at this time?" Martha asked.

Sarey Rose said, "All we know is, your kin tried to pay him in slaves and he refused."

Martha said, "We don't know what that meant."

"In 1853, it could have meant anything," Peter said.

"What did they do with the children?" Sarey Rose asked.

"Half of them died before ten," Martha said.

Sarey Rose thought about all the dead children on all the sides. She sighed, and set up the machine to continue recording. When she moved to turn off the display terminals, Martha reached for her hand. "No," Peter said. "We want to watch it."

Martha said, "You can go now, Sarey Rose."

High WASP whip in the voice, now.

Sarey Rose knew what they'd ask her: was the machine interpreting correctly, was she interfering with the images? The machine wouldn't make chimpanzees when the shapes were closer to people, had fifteen gradations of skin color to work with, and with only five minutes of scan at ten feet would be within 1/16th of an inch of true facial contours. Would use the reconstructed house to model the past light streams.

The man in the house last night looked mulatto to her. If a man were rich enough, did his face look whiter to his neighbors?

Neither Martha nor Peter looked at her as she came into the office. The master slept with his slave on her special bed. The mistress of the house faced a black man in the parlor who lacked the owned deference Sarey would have expected.

"Rose, we can't identify this man."

"I don't know your slaves," Sarey Rose said.

"He's not acting like a slave," Peter said.

"Maybe your ancestor wasn't interested in taking unruly slaves?" Martha said.

"Did you watch last night?" Sarey Rose said.

"We did," Peter said. "We'd appreciate it if you didn't review the recordings."

Sarey Rose looked at them both. Whatever the sex had been like, both of these people couldn't get to sleep after what they saw. She decided to leave them and the recordings alone for a while. "So what did you learn?"

Peter said, "He sure didn't force her."

Martha said, "I think he loves her."

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"Then, who is the guy in the parlor?" Sarey Rose asked. "Her dad?"

"We didn't sell anyone after we sold Esau," Martha said. "Ann brought the slaves to the marriage, but they like Flint better than they like her."

Sarey Rose realized that they'd been slipping into talking about the ancestors in contemporary terms: *your people, we, you.* "Esau got sold over 180 years ago. Don't you think we ought to have gotten over it by now?"

Peter said, "I always wondered how he felt about being sold, rejected by his own people."

"Hell, Peter, if he got lucky, he ended up owned by a guy in Tenneesee who collected rascally niggers. He'd buy rascally ones because they were bright, let them teach each other how to read because he thought blacks were apter than whites at that, and then turn them loose to run his farm while he took a percentage."

Martha said, "I've read that passage in Frederick Law Olmsted, too. It's unlikely a slave sold in this part of Virginia would end up in Tennessee."

"I said if he got lucky." Sarey Rose found Olmsted's account fascinating. She'd rather be investigating that farm than this one. What was it like to have been a bright slave with such a master? You take what you can get, her grandfather said from his cane rocking chair back in her memories. Psychologically, the South trapped one in a Klein bottle, some topological psychological distortion that flung everyone, including those who'd merely moved South, back into the past just when they felt they'd finally moved into the future.

Was the South still looking, as Olmsted had described it over a hundred years ago, for the right highway, the newest relocated factory with imported management? Bring in outsiders rather than surrender power to the uppity white trash or the blacks.

In 1853, the black man left Ann in the parlor, went out, came back with a white man who took off his hat and looked at Ann. *You okay? I'm sorry you've got such a sorry husband.* Sarey Rose said, "*My* ancestor. Old Joe. We didn't get any photos of him until the 1870s, but it looks pretty much like him."

The black man looked from Ann to Joe, said, perhaps, *I'll tell the master the overseer is here. Can't do to stay in here with the lady, Mr. Overseer.*

Joe bobbed his head and stayed, holding his hat in both hands in front of him, covering his groin. Sarey wondered if the pose was arbitrary or by design, to hide an erection.

Ann got up from the sofa. Joe spoke, *You've been crying, Miss Ann. He can fuck her, but if I even speak to a man, the slaves tattle on me.*

Was that really what she said? Sarey Rose looked at Martha and Peter.

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Joe put his right hand on her shoulder. She flinched, turned her head toward the door.

The black man showed Flint in. Flint spoke. The overseer cringed, looked at the black man. The black man seemed unusually calm and didn't lower his eyes to the overseer.

The overseer might have said, *Who were your people back to the east? Who were your people before you came here?*

Then they turned slightly, nodding at each other, Joe nodding at the black man who nodded back, just not as deep a nod as Joe'd given him. Ann went to the bedroom, crawled back into the bed, and began to masturbate under the covers, her face muscles clenched in a grimace.

"Can you blank the screen, for God's sake!" Martha said.

Sarey Rose said, "Didn't know those lily-white slaver women did such things." But she blanked the screen.

Peter said, "Always *heard* that the mistress made old Flint mean. Shit."

Sarey Rose said, "She seems fond of the overseer."

"At the end of the year, she dies, you know. Brain congestion."

Sarey Rose said, "After she had your great-grandfather, right?"

Martha said, "He was raised on a black woman's tit. Took care of her after the war."

Peter said, "We don't recall that. After the war, Flint's son sold us land enough to farm. We paid him for it in work and cash. Maybe that was 'doing for us,' but the deal cost us same as he charged *other* folks. Man needed help, niggers needed land."

Sarey Rose said, "We can skip forward in time unless you want to watch the whole fucking year."

"It's the story of us all," Martha said.

"Not *my* story," Sarey Rose told her. "I didn't have a history before 1937, when my daddy got to go to college thanks to Mr. Roosevelt."

Two months later in 1853, and a day later in the present, Sarey Rose watched her ancestor on a poster bed with Ann. Daytime—all the blacks should be in the fields or working in the kitchen.

"Well, who said they didn't lie?" Sarey Rose said. Martha and Peter walked out of the room. Sarey sat watching the now-dead woman sobbing in the overseer's arms. *He doesn't understand me. He loves that bitch he owns, not me.*

The overseer seemed nervous. Sarey knew he didn't get killed for this. He ran off, joined some rag-tail deserters' camp in Floyd County, came slinking back after Flint was dead and his son in charge of things.

"Are they quite through?" Martha asked from the other room.

"Jeez, he's *my* ancestor. Is getting fucked by the overseer so shameful? After all, *your* great-whatever-removed-granddaddy liked black meat."

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Peter said, "Are they dressed yet?"

"No, she's having a hissy fit in his arms. Those times weren't fair for white women and black men."

"White women like Ann didn't have to lift a finger."

"Dumber than their cooks and weavers, the poor stupid bitches," Sarey said. "Taught, maybe, how to play the piano and draw some, but never well enough to work." *Her* ancestresses back in 1853 worked on looms and sewed, just as her cousins did these days, only these days, they programmed computers to lift the threads and cut the cloth.

"Look, just tell me when they're dressed," Martha said.

The black slave woman wasn't in her gaudy cabin, gone with the master on business, but the old male slave came in with another young black woman, carrying cooked food from the outdoor kitchen to Miz Ann at dinner time. The old slave looked at Ann and the unmade bed, turned and went away. The second young black woman put a tray on Ann's bedside table, sniffed the air, and stood waiting.

"Could you add the dining room?" Peter asked.

"Yes, they'll be eating in the dining room when Flint comes back," Martha said. "The interactions would be interesting."

Sarey Rose wondered if they'd decided to forget what had just happened, what had happened in 1853. The two families, owners and owned, had managed to forget it the first time, why not the second time? Southern women never minded that their menfolk kept black mistresses, because those women weren't a real threat to the marriage. Southern men did this because they lived in a matriarchial society. Right? As though any matriarchial society let its men believe that not having orgasms would make males sick.

"I can get the dining room on line sometime next week if the engineering department has more glass fiber the right size," Sarey Rose said.

Dining room, bedroom, parlor, slave cabin. A quartet in two centuries, Sarey Rose thought as she brought up the screens on July 31, 1853.

How long could Ann and Joe meet without Flint killing one or the other of them? Sarey Rose decided Flint had killed Ann. She was pregnant, nervous.

In the slave concubine's cabin, Flint met with his slaves. *Mistress ain't faithful. She's gonna bring you a poor white-trash baby.*

Joe disappeared, a man who knew when to run. Sarey Rose taped the next several weeks, running the tapes fast to see if Joe reappeared.

Ann swelled. The black mistress swelled. At dinner, September 14, 1853, Flint looked from the black woman's belly to his wife's, his fingers moving to the count of nine.

Martha said, "Oh, shit." Sarey had forgotten she was there. Peter left them alone most of the time now, wondering perhaps if *he* was the true

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heir to the estate, not Martha, the descendant of a poor white-trash overseer who helped run a pro-Union deserters' camp, and who came back only when the man he'd cuckolded was dead.

Sarey remembered her great-grandfather saying, "The Southern men died in the War for pure meanness."

And the local black schoolmaster, a former slave, chose Sarey's grandfather to be his lord back in the 1920s. Every black man needed a lord in those Klan-addled days, and what better choice than a Lincoln Republican?

Ann twisted her wedding band, ate, twisted her wedding band, ate.

The concubine spoke to Flint, saying, perhaps, *I'm a truer woman than she is. Now you gonna let me free?*

Perhaps Flint didn't quite believe that Ann carried another man's baby. White women didn't like sex. All men needed it to prevent illness. That white man's burden, sperm. Old Flint purged his system every chance he got, stayed healthy.

Sarey Rose wondered if Martha believed that herself, if that's what made her so tolerant of Peter, or if, as a historian, she accepted the foibles of study cultures.

Ann said something that might have been, *But I loved you. You could have loved me.*

Flint looked up at her sharply and spoke. *I married you, provided for you. Even if you brought slaves to the marriage as a dowry, you needed me more than I needed you. Slaves don't work for women the way they work for a man.*

The slave concubine must have spoken. Her back was to the optical pick-ups. Flint seemed contrite. He might have said, *Sorry.* The pregnant slave woman left the room. Ann picked at her food. Flint shoved his into his mouth, cutting his meat with a clasp knife he pulled from his pocket.

Sarey Rose said, out loud, "We never owned slaves. Never."

Martha said, "But they wouldn't work for women."

"You read that the same way I did?" Sarey asked.

"Yeah. I talked to someone in linguistics. We could do a program that would give us best approximation, see the several choices."

"We're recording."

"But . . ."

"We're only getting an approximation of the light patterns as is. I don't know if a lip-reading program operating on real time would help the visual recognition program or cause feed-back distortions."

"But we both read that."

"We've got more context than a lip-reading program would have, too. If we'd decided that Flint was perfectly white, he'd be looking perfectly white on the screen now. I'd have corrected once, the computer would have assumed it was in error if it came up with darker than white values for his skin."

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Martha said, "I want to hear them."

"You can't. Soundwaves are too big."

"We're not even really seeing them."

"Close enough. Maybe she's smiling, not grimacing."

Martha said, "And your ancestor disappeared like a coward."

"Should he have died for her? The law then was on Flint's side."

"Couldn't he have taken her away?"

"We don't know that Joe didn't ask. We don't know . . ."

Martha interrupted. "Was he married?"

"I never heard of a wife before the war," Sarey Rose said, resenting the interrogation. "But maybe Ann was too big a snob to marry him, even though she would sleep with him."

"She cared for him more than that," Martha said.

"Only definite ancestor in the mix you've got left, isn't she?" Sarey Rose said. Lip-reading program, shit, she realized she didn't want to install it now, coordinate it with the visual recognition program. Bitch of time to do it.

At the table in the past, the two people ate in silence. Flint's mistress left the room and a second female slave brought in a dish of stewed apples.

Sarey Rose said, "At least, he's considerate of one of them."

Brain congestion—Sarey Rose remembered brain swelling was often a side effect of a failed strangulation.

In one month, the half-white baby was born from a squatting woman, caught by an older black woman. In the next month, the white baby came down onto boiled and dried scrap sheets on the bed in the master bedroom. The same black woman caught the baby. In the future, the observers came in, stared, left, came back, stared, went without talking.

Flint came in to see both sons, held both of them. Peter said, "There have been worse fathers."

Sarey Rose heard that as a rebuke to her ancestor.

Martha spent less time on site, took recordings of the raw data as though a different computer and screens might show her a past she approved of more. She wore jeans more often, seemed more casual about her hair.

Perhaps, Sarey Rose thought, Martha decided to has succumb to her technologically discovered white-trash roots. Sarey took a day off and bought a suit. When she came back, Peter said, "Joe's back." Martha was watching the screen in the master bedroom as though she wanted to turn into photons heading pastward.

"Back?" Sarey Rose wondered if the people in the rooms they watched ever noticed the future light—too small to be more than sparkles in a

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black room, something that could be explained away as an eye twitch. But the human eye could catch a photon.

Joe sat on the bed, talking desperately to Ann, leaning on one arm. His body bobbed closer, then moved back, over and over, like a rocking toy. The baby lay in her arms, looking at the stranger.

Ann's lips moved. *No, he's being decent about it. But then he's got another son down in the quarters.*

"We haven't picked up Flint all day. I scanned today's tapes when I came in and saw this," Martha said.

The overseer bent over Ann then, grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. The baby began squalling. Joe picked up the baby. According to the lip-reading program, he said, *I'm taking my son then.*

"It was his first child," Sarey Rose said. She expected that Flint would burst into the room at any second, but he didn't, wasn't around to hear the baby squalling. His black mistress and the man who appeared to be her father came into the room and took the baby from Joe. Ann must have said, *Get out,* because they left then.

Ann argued with Joe. Joe grabbed her. By the neck. The two past people writhed on the screen, Ann's legs flailing out from her bedclothes. Sarey Rose wanted to run, but she watched on, aware of the others breathing in a rhythm different from her own shallow breaths. They looked at her once, quick stab of eyes. *My white-trash ancestor.*

Then the older black man came back, stood in the doorway. Spoke. *You've done her enough damage.*

Joe loosened his hands, said something that seemed like, *You gonna tell your owner?* Ann lolled back on the bed, gasping.

"She's still alive," Martha said.

Sarey Rose knew that strangling didn't kill necessarily at once. The violent fluctuation in brain blood pressure did damage.

Then the slave concubine came up without the baby, with towels and water. She and her father let Joe go.

Martha said, "So are *they* going to kill her?"

"She dies in a day or two," Peter said.

"Aftermath of his choking her, throwing her about," Sarey Rose said.

The slaves seemed familiar with the concept. The woman looked at Ann, who was still gasping as though the air had clotted in her windpipe. Her father spoke. She left and came back with wet towels and rice powder.

Ann tried to fight the black woman as she washed Ann's throat bruises and lay down a dusting of powder over Joe's nail marks.

Martha said, "I've got to consult a physician."

Peter said, "She's not hurting Ann further. She's just trying to disguise what happened."

Sarey Rose said, "Maybe Joe was fucking *all* Flint's women."

"God, that's ugly," Martha said.

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Sarey had known how ugly she'd been before the sentence left the air. But then maybe the slave woman thought it'd have a better chance of getting freed if Miz Ann was dead. How many slave concubines had the hope that the master would free them for bearing his children? What proportion of slaves who bore their masters' children *did* get freed? It must have happened just enough to make the dream a common hope. Or maybe just being treated better was enough.

Whatever, Miz Ann wouldn't run off to the mountains with her white-trash lover. And, like so many *contemporary* uneducated white-trash men, Joe killed his lover when he couldn't have her the way he wanted to have her. "Uneducated," Sarey said out loud.

"What?" Peter said.

"I've got a distant kinsman who killed his ex. White trash still do that when they're dumb and uneducated."

"Kill their lovers?" Martha said.

"So now we know about the past," Sarey Rose said. "It was stupid."

"We weren't just malleable work folk," Peter said. "We had our own agendas."

"Bunch of uneducated wishful thinkers, all of them," Sarey Rose said.

Martha said, "So Flint came home just in time to bury her. Her mother comes tomorrow to see her, but everyone wants to cover up why the overseer was in her bedroom. Her people were better than Flint, even."

"But you're half my kin," Sarey said. "Do we need to watch through the end?"

Martha looked at Peter. He said, "We'd prefer that you don't."

Sarey Rose walked out. She'd been excluded again. Not by blood links this time, but by her own rudeness. She put her hands in the pockets of her new jacket, feeling overdressed and lumpish.

She sat down under the ancient catalpa tree and leaned her head back against it and told herself she was good at what she did. Told herself over and over.

And the Civil War came, and Joe hid out in a deserters' camp and came back when it was over, and the ex-slaves wouldn't let him on the property, and Ann's son went away forever and Joe married, and the lineage spread up to Sarey Rose and Martha, and the past twisted them in knots. How many layers of ancestor, of family lies?

Sarey Rose thought, *Someday, we've got to forget it all. Because we can't really know.*

In the parking lot of the restored plantation house, two kids traded off on a portable computer linked to the rest of the modern world by modem, sending, reading, giggling, pushing the laptop at each other. Sarey Rose wondered if anyone in the future cared enough about the dead to watch *them.* ●

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ON DISTANCE

In 1987 astronomers observed
the birth of a galaxy—
a billion suns ignited
within an incandescent cloud
seventy-one billion trillion miles away.

The other day I figured out
I was five handshakes away from Hitler.
In the sixty-eight campaign
I shook hands with Nixon,
Who'd shaken hands with Eisenhower,
Who'd shaken hands with Roosevelt,
Who'd shaken hands with Stalin,
Who'd shaken hands with Hitler.

So there you have it,
In a universe where distances are enormous
And human intelligence exists
As a kind of whimsical afterthought,
Evil is as immanent
And as intimate as touch.

—Sandra Lindow

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Sonia Orin Lyris

PAYBACK

Sonia Orin Lyris takes on our vast, and sometimes incomprehensible, universe in a compact tale that sweeps across the eons.

He came to me, desperation twisting pale features on his young face, seeking from me a key.

That was not unusual, though it seemed to me that it had been a while since the last one had come to ask. *How* long I did not know, and did not try to remember.

I floated a half-turn in my chair and reached into the store of keys behind me, which even to my eyes flickered in and out of the universes in which I was planted. I pulled out one of many red, soft-skin boxes, and handed it to him.

The light that I produce on what passes for my skin flooded his skin and his light blond hair, making his paleness look ice-white. His pastel eyes glittered. In that moment, he looked for all the universe like the proverbial frozen child.

After a quick, doubting look at me, he opened the box. Inside was the key: a flat piece of crystal containing documentation and diagrams and directions. On it was all the technology he would need to address his people's particular problem.

"This is it?"

"Yes."

He disbelieved, of course. Most do. Something for nothing? Who would think it?

Me. I would.

He frowned. "And what do I give you in return?"

I had seen his reaction countless times. With something given back, the key wasn't a gift. Or so he hoped. Then, maybe it wouldn't be dangerous.

I could not stop myself. I laughed.

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"Nothing. This is what you asked for. This is the solution to the plague that attacks your homeworld, which would in time take all the life on your planet."

It did not seem possible, but his face paled further.

"Take it home," I said. "Give it to your scientists. They'll know what to do with it."

"I—"

He stumbled over his words. I waited patiently.

"I'm grateful. I don't know what to say."

"Say whatever you like. Do whatever you like. Avail yourself of my guest quarters. Walk in the gardens. Or go home and with each few minutes save a hundred more lives."

He inhaled sharply and stood. "I will go. But repayment—"

"No repayment. I do not accept such."

"But surely—"

"No. I do not desire anything in return."

He turned reluctantly, walked up the ramp to the door, which I opened for him. There he stopped and turned partway toward me, not looking at me, his pale features sharp, like carved ice. His voice was flat as he spoke. Flat and hard and resolved.

"We will repay you."

Then he left.

The mechanical device squatted in front of me, two arms drawn up around it, fitting flush against the rest of its metallic cylindrical body, the other two limbs out, crab-like.

"I have a delivery," it said.

I quested for the input jack, tasted the protocol, and flashed it a stream of bits, shortening our interaction to a fraction of a second, after which it left.

I quickly checked my storage area. This would set a bad precedent, I knew, but I hoped that accepting the many tons of platinum would cause me less trouble than refusing it. The device claimed it would not leave until the gift had been accepted, but I could change the device's programming to take the delivery back if I wanted to.

And I did want to. But in times past, when I refused such gifts, my action eventually led to an attack on me and my home station. Messy to deal with and discouraging to others who might come to petition me. If I took their gift, perhaps they would leave me to continue as before.

What, I wondered, did they suppose I would do with even an ounce of these metals that they thought were so precious?

I sighed, or something like it, and had the stuff put into my storage area, where I suspected it would sit uselessly for many millennia.

* * *

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They stood before me, two of them, their limbs all hard angles with small, sticky openings everywhere. With just a taste of the wine that was my continuum, I knew these to be specialized mouths. On their world, food life had wings and flew. These mouths kept them fed.

"We come to seek the Key Giver, the one told of in myth, sung of in song."

In recent times, there had been more petitioners coming to me. They would say that they had heard of me through the songs that wound their way through galactic trading centers. The songs all came from the light-haired race, who were becoming well-known for their efforts.

I was a bit surprised; I had thought that the ice-skinned folk would have forgotten me some time ago.

"Yes. And you have found me."

The two who stood before me spoke together, each providing pieces of the sound that made up their words. The words tasted like a dozen other languages I'd heard over the ages, but it splashed into old corners with new colors.

"We have talk to make with the Key Giver."

I gave them a smile they would understand.

"I am in time and space with you."

They stood stiffly, minor scent changes from their mouths indicating that they were ill at ease.

"We come to see the One. The Key Giver. We must make talk with him."

"Ah," I said, as if only now understanding. "I make an image of your meaning in my mind. This—" I pointed at myself, "This is the one you seek. The One. The Key Giver."

They simply stared at me.

It was often thus. Few races arise from the soup of life to travel between the stars without great struggle. What are they to think, then, when they find that there is no struggle at all needed to accomplish their goals?

Their expressions changed. They were willing to consider that my words might be truth.

"We are not pleased with you."

"Are you not."

"No. We object to what you do."

I smiled again, a friendly smile.

"I make an image of your meaning in my mind, but it is unimportant to me."

"Why do you do this?" one asked, breaking harmony with the other. The second stared at him, startled, terrified at the sudden loss of their harmony.

"What is it you ask or seek?"

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Again the first shook his head, refusing my question and its implied offer. The second keened, and then the first with him, and together they fell back into step, their sounds and speech weaving together again.

"We come to show you the error of your ways. To show you that you must stop."

"You waste your time, and mine, too. Speak of what you seek, and I will give you a key, if a key exists."

Together they cried their outrage. "You must put all your keys away! Listen to us: you destroy commerce. You ruin rare resource planets. You cause intergalactic wars. You must stop."

"This is what you seek? For me to stop?"

Their little mouths all widened.

"Do not tease us with your words. We respect you, Key Giver. Is there any starfaring world that does not tell stories of you and the wonders you give? Indeed, we ourselves thought you a myth. Then our enemies suddenly learned the rites to make space ships that our trackers could not find, and they began to destroy us. They say that this was your gift to them."

"Yes. I gave them a key. They used it."

"We could come asking a key to use against them, could we not?"

"Yes."

"And it would be just as effective as theirs?"

"Yes."

"And—you would give it to us?"

"Yes."

They shook. The scent of fear mixed with frustrated anger wafted off them like waves of heat.

"We do not wish it. We do not wish you to give such gifts to anyone anymore. We believe it is not good for races such as we and our enemies to have such tools. These gifts of yours upset all balances. They give advantage where it is not earned."

"Many have come to me before with this theory. You are not the first."

"You do not understand. We have made peace with our enemies. We now look beyond our small, simple disputes to the greater good, the benefit of all living intelligences. Your keys upset this great goal."

I eased myself into greater light. They squinted against me.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Please, Key Giver. You must hear us."

"I hear you. I listen for the key you have to ask of me. When you tell me what you seek, I will give you the key."

They did not sing, for a long moment. They stood like statues.

I am no stranger to great tensions. I waited.

"We are lost," they said at last. "If there were a key to make you stop giving keys, Key Giver, we would ask that."

I floated a turn in my chair and dug into my store, to the very bottom,

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and brought out a box. I recognized the box; I had brought it out before. Infrequently.

I presented it to them.

"Listen," I said, becoming very bright indeed. "Others have come before you, to ask this same thing of me. They have taken this box and they have opened it and they have used the key inside. Yet still I sit here before you."

The room smelled of their climbing fear.

"Will this key really do what you say it will do, Key Giver?"

"Yes."

"And—what will become of you?"

I smiled. "That is not your concern."

"Then—what has happened to those to whom you gave this key?"

"They perished."

"You destroyed them?"

"They perished," I repeated carefully.

"Our race. What will happen to our race if we use this key?"

"Your race will perish, along with the life of this universe."

After many of their heartbeats had passed, they handed the box back to me.

"That is too high a price to pay."

"Then I accept the key back. Do you wish to ask for another?"

"We have come to make you stop," they said. "What else is there to ask for that does not defeat our purpose?"

I blinked, in just the way they would have, to indicate that there was no answer to their question. They sighed as one, and I joined them. We exhaled long and then were silent, as their kind is when grieving, sharing in quiet company moments of great loss.

The one who stood before me now looked very much like the young pale one who had come to me so long ago, the one whose race had sent me tons of metal as a gift and had made songs and poems about me that now ranged across the galaxy. I dipped into the continuum to confirm my guess that he was long dead, and this one was not him. An ancestor, then. The likeness was charming.

I cocked my head at him, to indicate my interest. "Yes?"

He dropped to his knees, put his head to the ground in front of me in a gesture of great reverence.

"We realize the error of our ways, Great One! We see now that the precious metals our fathers and mothers sent you was insulting. We see how even our trite songs and poems tire you. Now we know that you want us to show our gratitude not in things or in song, but in the very essence of our bodies."

I didn't understand, not quite, and I wasn't sure I wanted to.

"You have come to ask for a key?" I asked hopefully.

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"We would not so presume. You have already given us the key that saved our race from extinction. What more could we ask from you?"

"Well, anything."

He shook his head. "We could not so insult you. Now we only seek to glorify you, Great One, in the way that you deserve."

"I ask no such thing."

"You would never ask such a thing. We know that. We also know that you are all-seeing. Look, then—look outside your home, into the vastness of space, and see what we have created to honor your glory!"

Dread tickled at my corners. I sent an eye out through the walls into the space around my glittering silver home station.

There, arrayed, were the five spaceships on which this pale creature and his kind had come.

"Yes," I said to him. "I see your ships."

He spoke into a device on his wrist. I braced, hoping that he was not signaling for a destructive force to be sent against me. I did not relish the thought of rebuilding my home, as I had been forced to do before in times long past.

Hatches opened in the spaceships, two on each, ten in total. Out of each came unprotected ones of his kind. I watched as they pushed themselves out, toward my station home, arms outstretched as if they were birds in thick atmosphere, not fragile flesh in a vacuum.

They each began a similar series of motions with their arms and legs, in a coordinated dance. I marveled that they could manage this with the complex soup of chemicals that had been put into their blood to keep them from freezing too fast.

In moments, though, their movements became jerky from lack of oxygen and the suffusion of poisons in their systems. Blood came from some of their faces, from eyes and ears and mouth, frothily covering their white features.

They sailed slowly toward my home station, spinning. Some would hit. They would cause no damage, but might smear some of their redness over the silver shell of my home. I did not change their direction, and I did not plan to clean up the mess.

The pale young one before me was still on his knees. His head touched the ground again.

"We give you this dance as a token of our gratitude, Great One. We know we can never repay you for what you have given us, but we will give ourselves in the trying."

"So you have not come for a key?"

He looked up in confusion, followed by shock that I did not understand, and then that was replaced by despair at his own inability to express himself. He must have been chosen as the spokesperson of his people because of his lineage, not his ability to speak well.

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Not that it mattered. I understood him perfectly.

I sighed, so that he would see it and would know that I was sorrowful. Even if he could not understand why.

"If you have not come for a key," I said, "then I must ask you to leave."

Outside the bodies spun slowly toward my home.

He stared up. In time, he spoke again. Tentatively at first, then more ardently, saying things he had said before, and, in time, saying new things.

I said nothing to his words, nor to his pleading, nor to his apologies, nor to his agonized whimpers. I watched silently as he wept, and then as he cut himself, spilling some of his own blood on the floor in front of me. I said nothing as he bruised his head on my floor.

In time, he stood, shaking and slumped, and left.

She stood before me, proud and tall, only her skin temperature betraying her tension. When she finally spoke, her voice was low and deep, reflecting the multi-chambered voice box of her kind.

"Great Key Giver, I address you: I have come across great nothingness and fought terrible demons to seek audience with you. Will you see me?"

"I will see you, tall one," I said, replying in the formal mode of her kind.

She began to groom herself unconsciously, a tension response, then stopped, uncurled, and stood straight.

"Many thousands of years ago, as we notch time," she began, "there came travelers to the shores of our planet. They claimed benign interest in our ways and joined us in our practices. Long-lived were they, gentle and wise did they seem. They married in threes, and were as devoted to each other as to us. Across generations they stayed with us. In time, we came to regard them as siblings, and we looked on them as kin with great love. Never had such a thing happened to us before, Great Key Giver. We were like children among the sharp rocks."

"Yes," I said, to let her know I had heard.

She paused, pretending not to see me, to give silence that I might rest my mind before she continued.

"Indeed, Great Key Giver, these beings gave us much. We now travel between suns and we join interstellar trade routes. We stand tall among the galaxies, and it is because of them that we can."

Indeed she stood taller then, the curve to her body stretched up into a line.

"Yes, you do."

She shot me a grateful look, then went back to her story.

"Key Giver, our alien kindred do, in time, have offspring. They require for each child a living host to feed on. We were to be those hosts."

A look of pain crossed her face and her tail went rigid.

"Please go on."

"Suddenly," she said softly, "we could no longer communicate with

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them. They had gone into their first breeding season, in all the time since they had arrived, and our words no longer meant anything to them.

"We did many things, Great Key Giver. Among them we sent many of ourselves out to find you. We followed the Trail of Puzzles that leads to you. Then a Giver, a pale one, came to us. Claiming to be your representative, he gave us a key."

"Someone has misled you, tall one. I have no representatives."

I felt a tingle somewhere outside me, washing back over me and sucking down again, gone before I could place it. Premonition? Memory?

She bowed her head, confused. "We feared and hoped you would say such, Great Key Giver. This pale Giver claimed to represent your generosity. We petitioned him for help, to save us from our alien kindred. We returned from him with a key. This key."

She drew out of the folds in her stomach a slim, yellow box. It was the wrong color, and not quite the right shape, but it was otherwise similar to my own.

I must have dimmed. She looked at me a moment, then opened the box. Inside was a crystal, and on it codes.

"It is a formula for a virus that will destroy our alien kindred. We agonized to use it, but as our alien kin began to divide us into camps, some for breeding, some for use as hosts, we made a last effort to fight. We released the virus."

I knew what had happened. I tilted the bowl of continuum and let the images flow across me. I saw the tall ones' alien kin begin to fall to the virus and retreat to a ship above the planet.

"They died," I told her. "But the virus mutated. Your kind also is dying in great numbers. Now your alien kin are attacking you as well."

"Yes."

"What do you ask?"

"We ask a key to save our people."

I reached behind me, brought out a box, and handed it to her. She looked at me with soft eyes, her body curled again.

"What will this key do for my people, Key Giver?"

"It is an anti-virus for the one you were given."

"What of our alien kin?"

"It will cure them, too."

"Then we will have the old problem again, will we not, Key Giver?"

"I doubt that it will be the same problem, tall one." She straightened at my address. "Because the situation is so changed. You are no longer ignorant of what your alien kin are or what they can do."

For a moment she considered. "Yes. I thank you, Key Giver. The others—the ones calling themselves Givers, they would take no payment. Will you also take nothing in return?"

"No, tall one. Go and save your race."

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She walked up the ramp, very straight and tall. To show her respect, she did not even glance at me again before she left.

The Givers had given her their key. One could even argue that given time their key would result in an outcome where her race no longer had this problem.

I sighed, felt the millennia hanging on me like blood-sucking worms on a bloodbeast.

I remembered those; they had come long ago. Intelligent, peace-loving, blood-sucking worms. They were quickly going through the life on their planet, and had come to me for solutions. They had taken the key I gave them, had used it, and had not insisted on paying me back.

I sat deep, and let the pull of my sigh take me down into the ground that was not ground, into the other universes from where I gained the answers that, in this universe, became keys. There I sat in a deep, long bath.

In time, I told myself, this, too, would become memory.

"Give me the good stuff or I'll blow your station to quarks!"

The small creature stood before me, in a challenging posture, his few fingers curled around an energy weapon.

"What do you ask or seek?"

"I don't ask anything. I demand. Tell me where you keep the good stuff."

I thought of my stores. There might actually be something valuable there. It seemed to me that there was, but it had been a long time and I wasn't sure.

"I give keys. I give information resources, not physical resources."

"I do not want your keys. I want something of value."

"Ask a question. Tell me what you seek."

He snorted. "I know you and your Givers all too well—don't pretend that *giving* garbage and the wisdom of the ages with me—that's got the value of excrement. I know how Givers collect items of value. You must have plenty."

"Try a question."

He pointed the weapon at me.

"Give. Now."

The weapon would not work on me, nor would the explosives that his ship carried, but confrontation was not my goal.

Someone had, it was clear, hired him to destroy me. The Givers, perhaps. He had come here to take the good stuff before disposing of me.

Outside the station, I glimpsed another seeker beginning docking procedures. I had to speed up this audience.

"I have no time for your threats, little creature of cosmic dust," I said imperiously. "Ask a question or leave."

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His expression darkened. He spat a curse.

"All right. How do I get into the store rooms where your treasure is kept?"

Finally. I hid my sigh of relief. I reached behind me and drew out a box and handed it to him.

He took it, opened it. "What is this?"

"It is the key you asked for. Your ship's computer will help you decode it."

He licked his lips, glanced up at me, the barest hint of uncertainty on his furry face. "But what is it?"

"It is the instructions for unlocking my storeroom."

He snorted. "You think I am that simple?"

That was not a question I wanted to answer.

"It doesn't matter what I think, or how simple you might be; you've asked for and received a key, and the key will do what you ask."

His expression told me that he didn't think he was here for an education. Answers are keys, too, but he didn't want any of those. As he swore and tensed to draw his weapon, I didn't offer him any.

He drew and fired. I felt the pulse cover me like a hot blanket, felt it speed up, fly around me, and snap back, crushing him to the floor.

He lay there, unbreathing. The crystal key lay on the ground where the box had fallen to the floor and come open. For a moment, I stared at the tableau and pondered the mysteries that even my keys do not answer.

The newly arrived ship docked, and the occupant was just now finding its way to the passageway that led to my room, where it would, I hoped, simply ask a question.

I cleaned up the mess.

The three arrayed themselves in a triangle, their long limbs crossing each others' in an aesthetic pattern that I knew meant supplication, but meant supplication with resistance to surrender. Clearly they did not know me. Or perhaps they had had dealings with the Givers. I wondered what message the Givers were handing out these days with their keys.

"We come to ask you to reconsider, Key Giver. Or at least to explain to us the why."

Something had happened, something not of my making, something beyond my keys. I felt heavy.

"Reconsider what?"

"This." Two of the twisted limbs handed me a box. It was yellow. A Giver key, not one of mine.

"What am I reconsidering?"

"Your decision about us. We do not wish to be impertinent, but the planet you have given us is not easy to live on. Already we have lost so many, and we are so few already—"

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Their limbs clutched, trembling slightly.

I dipped into continuum to understand.

"You are right, the planet is not suitable for you. But I did not give you this planet. You have been deceived. The Givers are not my representatives."

Their limbs fluttered in confusion and shock.

"Then. . . ?"

"Then you are free to go where you wish, make food of and war on whomever you like. The Givers are merely another race, like yourselves. Deal with them as such."

"But they quarantine us! They tell us we are evil because of the sins of our parents. After a thousand years, they say, if we behave to their liking, we may rejoin other races in trade. What shall we do?"

I reached behind myself, into my pouch of keys, but all the boxes I touched slid away from my grasp.

"That is not a question for which there is a key. Please ask again."

"We have been told that we are evil, that we must mend our ways, but we do not know how. Tell us how."

Again I reached behind me, into the pouch. Again all the boxes slid away.

"Again, your question has no key. Please try again."

Their limbs tensed, fluttered.

"We wish to survive. We do not wish to cause hardship to others. We never knew our parents. Who *are* we? What have we done for which we are being punished?"

This time a key box came to me. For a moment I remembered the tall one, with her soft eyes. Somewhere her kind still lived, tucked away, hidden from the parents of these who stood before me.

I handed them the box.

"What is it?"

"It is the truth about what you are, which you and your kind do not learn until it is upon you. It is the mystery of how you live so long, how you make children, and what it is that the young of your kind feed on. Perhaps when you have understood this key, you will go back to the planet the Givers gave you and there live out your short lives. Or perhaps you will come back here for another key."

They stood for long moments in silence, digesting my words.

"Thank you, Key Giver."

The Giver ships arrayed themselves around my station. They had a marvelous set of weapons, sufficient to destroy my home many, many times over. If they used them, even a fraction of them, I would have to rebuild my home, and likely myself as well.

They boarded my station with military precision, destroying unlocked

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doors and securing empty rooms. Pale, with stiff white uniforms, they poured into my room in a stream, until they nearly filled it.

When she walked in, the likeness was so sharp that it only took me a single whiff of continuum to confirm that she was a distant descendant of the one who had first visited me.

She stepped up close to me, her posture one of confidence and challenge.

"We are here for the Giving," she said to me, her hands moving in what I gathered was a ritual opening for discussion. Then, in a harsher tone: "We will give you one chance, one chance only, to stop calling yourself Key Giver."

"Why should I do that?"

"We do not find the title amusing. You insult us and the true Key Giver."

"What is it you ask or seek?"

Lines of fury appeared in her pale face. She pulled out a small device, pointed it at me.

"Register offender," she told the device. "Offender of the faith."

"Behavior?" the device asked.

Her voice dripped with disgust. "Presents itself as Key Giver."

I was impressed with the device. The artificial intelligence therein would help interpret the rules of their whole, complicated faith. I delved into the software and followed the pathways. Most offenses, I saw, would result in the giving of a key. A Giver key.

Most, but not all.

"Blasphemy," the device pronounced. "Subject must immediately recant and suffer penance, or be destroyed."

She nodded solemnly and looked at me.

I decided to try again. "What do you ask or seek?"

Her face began to flush.

"We seek to remove your abominable presence from the great Key Giver's blessed universe."

I reached behind me, but no box came to my hand. It was as I suspected; she sought to satisfy conflicting goals.

"There is no key for what you seek. Please try again."

"You have heard the pronouncement. Recant. Say you are not the Key Giver. Take penance for claiming to be the Great One."

I reached behind me again. A box came to my hand.

I did not know what this key would contain and I did not look. All would become clear in time. I presented the box to the pale woman.

Startled, she opened the box, frowned, handed it back to a man behind her. "You must recant now, or be destroyed."

I sparked out in a line, pointing at the box behind her. "Read the key from your computers. You should have no trouble decoding the information.

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Behind her, the man put the crystal up to another small device.

"We will," she said. "We will decode all your impostor keys, once you have accepted our authority."

"It's blank," the man said.

The woman smirked. "Of course it is. He is not a Giver and certainly not the Great One."

My key was blank? I frowned inside, wondering what this might mean. If there was no answer, then no key should have been possible. But a blank key?

"Do you recant?" she asked.

A blank key. I took a quick sip of continuum. I discovered many things about the woman in front of me and the many races the Givers had influenced, but nothing to explain a blank key.

I wanted time to puzzle out the mystery. I could step away into another universe to create that time, but it would sap my energy here, which would make me less able to withstand her attack, if she gave one. I did not want to have to reconstruct myself in pieces from other universes, not if I could help it.

A blank key must mean that the answer was evident.

"Well? Do you recant?"

Could I? Would it matter if I did?

"Yes," I said.

Why not?

She blinked in surprise, took a half-step back, then another, to make it seem that she had meant the first. "Then you must accept penance as well."

"And that is?"

She turned back to whisper to the man behind her. They consulted the computer. Much of the complexity of their religion had to do with penance—penance that would apply to specific and varied races, penance that would provide for the church.

"You must give us all your material wealth. We will insist on making a tour of your entire station."

Material wealth? It seemed to me that I might have something. Didn't I have stores somewhere?

"Is that all?"

"And you must stop offering these—" she hurled the box with the blank key to the floor, "disgusting imitations of Giver keys."

That was easy.

"I accept."

She eyed me skeptically, but I had agreed to her terms, so she was bound to accept them.

"So be it," she said. Then to her crew: "Search the station. Take everything."

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I did a quick inventory of the station and found my stores, looking inside to see what I had. There was a large shipment of platinum, covered with dust.

Then I remembered where it had come from. I hid my amusement.

The two stepped inside my chambers and arrayed their long limbs in a simple pattern that meant sorrow and petition. The last time there had been three of them.

"What do you ask or seek?"

"We have read the key you gave us some years ago, great Key Giver. We understand now what we are, and why our kind was banished to a hostile planet. We understand now why the Givers who are not your representatives fear and hate us so. We even hate ourselves. Our parents did not know what they did to their host race. They did not intend harm, but this does not much console us. Key Giver, must we be so? Must we lose all sense and reason to reproduce ourselves?"

"What do you seek?" I asked again. Gently, to let them know that I heard their anguish.

"We seek guidance for our future. The Givers were furious to discover that we had broken our quarantine to come to you. When we returned to our planet, they began to eradicate us. We fight a war with them now. We have lost many. We hide in caves on the planet surface. We have little left."

"And your third?"

"Our third is dead."

"I am sorry for your loss."

"Our race is few. We struggle to stay alive. The Givers have strong weapons and much fury, and we—we are disheartened. We do not know if we should fight back at all. Perhaps we should let the Givers destroy us. Perhaps the universe would be better off without us."

"And what do you seek?"

"An answer, Key Giver: do we fight the Givers or let them destroy us? If we are to fight, we must have both the will and the means. To have the will requires that we learn to breed without destroying others. To have the means requires that we quickly defeat an enemy of greater power and numbers. We are sure these things are not possible, but we come to you anyway. As our last chance."

I reached behind me for a key. I handed them the box. Their limbs seemed to freeze in place, despair spiced with hope.

"Surely there is no answer, Key Giver?"

I took a sip of continuum.

"Your concerns are answered on the key, in reverse order, because the Givers will destroy you if you wait long enough to find the answer to your breeding wishes."

"But we have nothing now—we can barely feed ourselves."

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I nodded. "Do not wait to return home to read the key—I will give you a device to do so. The key will provide you with a formula, the means to pay for the formula's ingredients, and a map to those who will be willing to help you fight the Givers."

"A formula to change the way we breed?"

"No. That you can make yourself. This formula is something else."

They waited patiently for me to continue. It came to me slowly as I sipped at the continuum.

"The formula will produce the Giver plague."

He pressed his pale forehead to the ground in front of me.

"You are my last hope."

All over his skin were sores. He was very thin, and his voice was a hoarse whisper.

"You are sick with plague."

"Almost half of us are dead. Our doctors say it is incurable. And some—" he looked up at me, fearful. "Some say you brought it on us. Some say you are not the false Giver after all, but the real one."

"Yes."

He exhaled, his breath weary and full of pain.

"Then we Givers—we have been horribly wrong. We have displeased you. This must be why you pursue our destruction, Great One."

"I do not pursue your destruction. I offer keys. What do you ask or seek from me now?"

"We are all dying. Great One, I have offspring and mates who I cannot leave, who need me, and I—" he faltered, his head bowed in shame. "That's true, but no—the real reason is that I don't want to die. Perhaps I am not worthy to ask my life of you."

"The Givers may judge," I said. "But I do not. Tell me what you seek."

He looked up, breathing hard.

"A key to cure myself."

I reached behind me and handed him the box.

He stood, shaking, and took the box, disbelief stamped on his face.

"Truly?"

"You will need to find someone who can supply the formula's ingredients and administer them to you before you are much weaker. Can you do that?"

"Yes. There is a place I know—this cure, Key Giver, will it cure others as well?"

"If you give it to them, yes."

He blinked pastel eyes, his pale lashes wetting.

"Should I, Key Giver? Should I save my people, after what we've done?"

"The key is yours to do with as you wish."

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His eyes darted around the room, then back at me. "I cannot make such a decision for all of my kind, Key Giver. If we have been so horribly wrong, then—you must advise me, Giver."

"I cannot," I said. "I do not judge. I do not advise. I give keys. This is your key."

"But—if you will not tell me what to do, then how will I know? The Giver faith," he said bitterly, "is no longer my guide."

"Do you wish a different key?"

He looked up at me, his face twisted in pain. He clutched the box very tightly to his stomach.

"No. I want to live. I will take the key. The rest—my race—I will decide about that later."

He walked slowly toward the door, his body bent, his breath labored. At the door, he stopped and faced me, his pale features a shadow of that ice-skinned one, the first, who had come to me so long ago asking for a key to cure his people.

"Key Giver—how can I repay you for this?"

Down deep in my soul, I felt a heaviness.

"No repayment is necessary. None is desired."

"But if this formula is all that you say it is, Key Giver, if it really will cure the plague—"

"It will. But no payment. I do not want it."

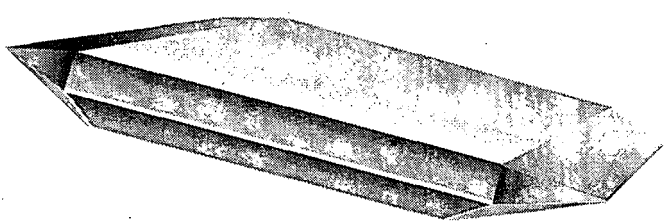
I saw thoughts flicker across his sunken face. Plans, hopes, decisions.

"Go tend to your own health, and then decide the fate of your people," I said. "Feel gratitude if you wish. Or feel joy. Or feel hate. But bring me nothing back."

"Yes, Key Giver. As you wish."

He said the words fast, as if to pacify me. Somehow, I did not believe that he would abide by them. Then he left.

I stared for a long time at the place where he had been. ●



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Charles L. Harness

THE FLAG ON GORBACHEV CRATER

Charles L. Harness was born in West Texas in 1915. He has a BS in chemistry, and an LLB, and he is a member of the Maryland and DC bars. "Before I retired, I was a senior attorney in the patent department of a large chemical manufacturer. I've published about ten novels and several dozen shorter items, all SF. Major loves: my wife, our children, our grandchildren, music, chess." The magical tale that follows is his first story for *Asimov's*.

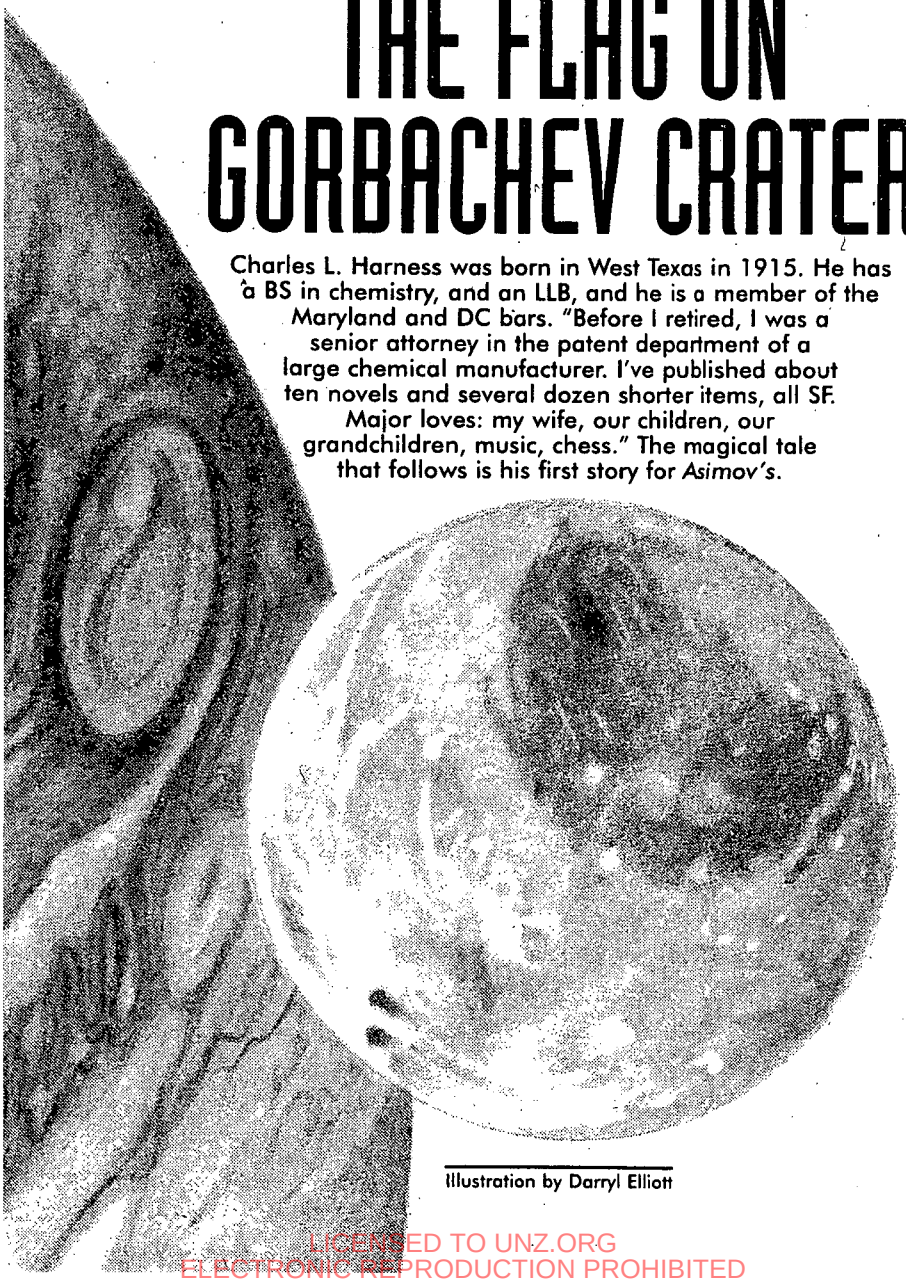

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

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Foreword

United Nations
Resolution XIII of 2036:

Whereas our Member Nations have quarreled much among themselves as to which of them is entitled to colonize the moons of Jupiter, especially the largest moon, known as Ganymede; and

Whereas certain of our Member Nations have threatened armed aggression to assert their claims; and

Whereas certain of our Member Nations are even now preparing to set forth with their respective warships in a race to take and hold Ganymede by violence; and

Whereas it is the wish of all Member Nations that this dispute be settled amicably and fairly;

Now Therefore,

(1) The first Member Nation whose citizen plants a flag on that area of Gorbachev Crater on Ganymede designated in Appendix A, and under conditions hereinafter described, shall be deemed to own Ganymede.

(2) Flag-planting vessels may leave space ports on Earth or Luna at any time after twelve-hundred hours, November 1, 2036. Contestant ships leaving earlier will be disqualified. United Nations corvettes will continuously monitor the area until completion of the race.

By Order of Member Nations
In Plenary Session
(Seal) (illegible)
Secretary

On the second Saturday of November 2036 the Glenwood High School of Glenwood, Virginia held its Homecoming Game and the American ship, *John F. Kennedy,* was still on hold at Moon Base.

1. Az-Zahra

"The drum!" shouted someone in the bleacher seats below. "It exploded!"

No, decided Daniel Beckwith, as he examined the scene through binoculars, the drum had not exploded. Actually, a girl had *materialized* almost exactly in front of the drum, and boy and drum had come crashing down on her. And with that, the halftime parade of the Glenwood Gladiator high-school band had come to a chaotic halt.

"Excuse, please." "Heads up." "Let me through." He clambered down through standing rows of unheeding students and hurried out across the football field. A moment later he pushed his way through the cluster of band members and looked down at the girl.

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She lay on her back. Some sort of towel or mat covered most of her, including her face. She wore a long muslin cloak. At that moment she thrust the mat aside and looked up at the circle of faces. Her eyes reached his and stopped.

Why me? he wondered. He had never thought of himself as particularly handsome. In fact, strong arguments to the contrary could be made. He was in his mid-thirties, with dark hair and dark, deep-set eyes. A nose broken years ago in a football scrimmage and never properly set gave him a pugnacious look, totally at odds with his personality.

And how about *her?* He could see at a glance that she was a beauty. She was fair, with red-tinted blonde hair done in braids around her head. She had pink cheeks and gray-green eyes that were still locked into his. Her dark-hued cloak revealed the contours of a very shapely body.

She was breathing hard. A fair-size purse of cordovan leather, looped to her neck by a gold chain, lay on her chest.

His nose wrinkled. He recognized the smells of field and turf and cleat-torn earth. Nothing strange about those. No, it was something else. It was the odor of electrical equipment. Ozone? he wondered. Odd.

He knelt down. "Are you all right?"

She peered up at him and frowned, as though she did not understand him. She struggled to a sitting position and pulled the mat over her front. She continued to look at him curiously, and then she said something that he couldn't understand. It was a question. He could tell that much. A question in a foreign language. Which one? He knew a few words in half a dozen. As a wild guess, it sounded as though it might be Arabic. One of the worst, yet he felt relief. Arabic meant she was probably an exchange student, perhaps from Egypt or Syria, some place like that. Somebody would turn up to take care of her, and she would certainly know a few words of basic English.

He repeated, "Are you all right?"

"Inglizi?" she asked slowly, searching his bearded face.

Ah, he thought. We're making progress. Despite the fair complexion, she's definitely Arabic. That's the Arab word for English. And it's equally clear that she doesn't understand English. He closed his eyes for a moment and tried to recall some of the "Phrases for Travelers" in his two-cartridge course in Arabic. He said, "Ismee Daniel Beckwith." My name is Daniel Beckwith. "Miin hadirtak?" May I ask who you are?

She answered distinctly. "Az-Zahra."

"Az-Zahra, tsharraft bi-mariftak." Az-Zahra, I am pleased to meet you. Could she understand him? He knew his accent was atrocious. Courage, Beckwith! He continued, with halting lapses. "Min wayne hadirtak?" Where are you from?

She brightened. "Ana min Cordoba."

Ah, he thought. Cordoba? Hmm. There's Cordoba Spain, Cordoba Ar-

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gentina, probably Cordobas all over Latin America. Perhaps she knew Spanish. He wasn't very good at it, but certainly it was better than his Arabic. Try for Spain. He said slowly, "¿Cordoba? ¿Usted es de Cordoba en España?"

She was beaming. "¡Sí! Cordoba en España." She got to her feet and rolled up her mat. Rows of rhinestones were sewn into the fabric, and they refracted a dazzling spectral display as the sunlight struck them. Standing there in her black leather slippers, she seemed a little below average height, perhaps five-foot-two or -three inches. Yet there was something regal in her bearing.

She said, "¿Habla vuesa merced Español?"

He claimed no expertise in the language; yet, it seemed to him there was something odd about her pronunciation. No matter, It was all recognizable, even that archaic "vuesa merced"—"your grace"—which had devolved into the abbreviation "usted" more than five centuries ago. He replied cautiously, "Un poco."

She looked up at him very seriously. "Digame, por favor, Sidi Beckwith, ¿que año?"

What *year?* The question shook him. And what's this "sidi" business? Cid? Medieval Spanish for "lord"!

He watched her carefully as he replied. "El año es dos mil treinta y seis." Two thousand thirty-six.

She considered that a moment, then looked up at him. "¿Año de los cristianos?"

Christian era? "Sí."

"Un tiempo muy largo," she mused. A very long time. "¿Pero Cordoba vive todavia?" But Cordoba still lives?

He wasn't exactly sure how to reply. He said simply, "Sí."

"Ah. Es bueno." She looked around through the circle of students and band members. Off to the west she could see the ridge of the Shenandoah Mountains. "Manzar jamiil," she murmured.

Back to Arabic? Did she say, what a beautiful view? Let's keep this in Spanish. At least I had a couple of years of that in school. In this very high school, no less. Twenty years ago? Seems like yesterday. He said, "¿Usted es estudiante de cambio?" Are you an exchange student?

She gave him a puzzled look. "¿Estudiante de cambio? No comprendo."

Not an exchange student? Very curious. Then who was she? He looked over to the west. It was about three-thirty, on a crisp November afternoon. The sun was already sinking down toward the hill crests. The field would soon be in shadow, and the temperature was going to drop abruptly. She was not dressed for this. He had to get her out of here.

"¿Dónde habita usted? Llevaré a casa." Where do you live? I will take you home.

She shook her head firmly. "Habito en Cordoba. No puedo volver."

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So she couldn't—or wouldn't—return to Spain. But that wasn't the point. She had to have a local residence. She hadn't simply dropped out of the sky. Or had she? He was missing something vital.

Meanwhile, back to reality.

Leave her here? Walk away from this before it became any messier? Ah, Beckwith, you sucker, he thought. You've done it again. Beckwith the volunteer. Who was it who took the car-struck dog to the vet? Beckwith. Who tried to protect the little old lady from the mugger? Beckwith. Beckwith, the man who gets kittens down out of trees.

He kept thinking, she belongs with somebody. But *who?* She doesn't seem to know. Maybe the accident has temporarily disoriented her. Where do you take lost children? To the sheriff's office? Well . . . He visualized the scene. "She claims she's from medieval Spain, Sheriff." The sheriff would probably hold them both until the state psychiatrist could drive up from Richmond.

He studied her as she stood there. The inspection was mutual. She was looking at him curiously, too; her mouth was twisted in a half-smile. She seemed radiantly healthy, young. Especially, young. She was holding her rolled-up mat against her chest, but it provided no real warmth. She was shivering.

"Hace frío," he said. "Hay que salir." It is cold. We have to leave.

"Sí." Then she hesitated. "¿Dónde vamonos?" Where are we going?

"A casa. A mi casa." Home. My home.

She considered that. "¿Sidi Daniel Beckwith, es vuestra merced un buen hombre?"

Was he a good man? He said, "Dios solamente es bueno." God alone is good.

She smiled. "Creo que El Sidi estes sufficiamente bueno. Iré con vuestra merced."

So, thought Beckwith, I am sufficiently good, and she will go with me.

He took her arm, shouldered a path through the mixture of curious faces and band instruments, and headed toward the parking lot.

He stopped. A dark-haired man in a gray cape stood in front of them, blocking their way.

2. Smerll

"Smerll . . ." muttered Beckwith. He stared at the other briefly, then shook his head. Depend on his ancient opponent to appear whenever it was possible to foul up the action. He held the girl tighter as he brushed past the Ethics Director of the Metropolitan Bar. He knew Smerll would be watching them.

"¿Quien es?" she whispered. "¿Un amigo?"

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"No." The reply was brusque.

Irwin Smerll. Long ago they had been classmates right here at Glenwood High. Irwin Smerll had lost out to Beckwith in the election for president of the senior class. That was just the start. The football squad had voted Dan Beckwith MVP—Most Valued Player. Irwin had lost by one vote. And that ranking had followed them both into college, and then through law school.

Beckwith's only serious girlfriend during his law school years and his apprentice year with a prestigious D.C. law firm had been Ellen May Burgess, daughter of Malcolm Burgess, the rich and powerful senator from Ohio. The young lawyer's duties in the law firm frequently involved emergency assignments that took him out of town or locked him into the communications room to assemble last-minute information for a courtroom appearance. More and more often he had had to break dates with Ellen May. When he reneged on his promise to take her to the inauguration balls of 2032, she bade him farewell.

Ellen May had married Irwin Smerll, and her senator father had got Smerll the position of Ethics Director in the Metropolitan Bar. Here, Smerll flourished. But Beckwith heard interesting rumors. Ellen May recited daily to her wincing mate the sterling virtues of the man she had not married, but wished she had.

Dan Beckwith did not like to think about Smerll. Or Ellen May. He was quite happy the way he was. Once a week Mrs. Kuiper (who was sixty-five and a bit slow) came in and cleaned his apartment. His relationships with the women at his office were pleasant but strictly business. He was content to live alone.

So now he held the girl tightly by the arm, hunched his head down between his shoulders, and suppressed an urge to look back. He knew the other lawyer would be looking at him—and at the girl. All he wanted to do just now was to get to his car and head out to his apartment and decide what to do with this exotic specimen from fantasy land.

He needed to have a long talk with her, and he didn't look forward to it. His thoughts jarred to a halt as they were walking into the entrance to the parking lot. She was tugging at his sleeve and asking him something.

"¡Que son . . . *esos!*" With a broad sweep of her free arm she indicated some hundred or so parked cars.

Had she never before seen a car? Was this possible? Even the wildest aborigines knew what a car was. But not this strange creature. "Son cars," he said. "Son los coches sin los caballos." Horseless carriages. Maybe she could understand that.

"Coches," she repeated in wonder, "*¿Sin caballos?*"

"Sí," he said.

"¿Dónde *estan* los caballos?"

"No hay los caballos, señorita. Los coches usan los motores, no usan ca-

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ballos." The cars use motors, not horses. He opened the car door. "Favor de entrar."

Hesitantly, clumsily, she climbed in, and he closed the door behind her. She jumped. He walked hurriedly around to the other side, got in, and started the car. She stifled a gasp. He let the motor idle a moment, and then reached for the seat-belt button—and changed his mind. What would she think when padded arms snaked around her and clicked together over her stomach and chest? Maybe he'd better skip the safety measures and simply drive very carefully. Not too much too soon.

Her next question was spoken so softly he could hardly hear it. "¿Sidi, por favor, que lugar es este?" What place is this?

"Es Pueblo Glenwood," he said.

That evidently meant nothing to her. Not surprising. "En Virginia," he added. "Casi cincuenta kilometros sud de Washington." He looked at her curiously. "En los Estados Unidos." No sign of understanding. He concluded very slowly. "¿En la America del Norte?" It was a question.

Nothing. Apparently she had never heard of Virginia, Washington, the United States, or North America.

Good God, he thought.

She said calmly, "¿Quantas leguas está el Pueblo Glenwood de Cordoba?" How many leagues is Glenwood from Cordoba?

Not miles, not kilometers—*leagues.*

He made some quick estimates. A league . . . three miles? And how far away was Spain? He said, "No sé exactamente, pero creo que Cordoba es casi dos mil leguas de aquí." Cordoba is two thousand leagues from here.

"Dos . . . mil . . . leguas . . ." She pronounced the words with slow satisfaction. "Bien. *Muy* bien."

Really? he thought. Whom are you running from, young lady? Somebody back in Cordoba? A very strange Cordoba where the primary language is Arabic, and automobiles are unknown? But as for Arabic, that hadn't been used in Spain since the early Middle Ages, when all central Spain belonged to the Moors. He grunted. He didn't like to think about the implications. She looked over at him inquiringly, but he just shook his head. Later, az-Zahra, later. Let me get into the tube, then we'll have a free half hour, just to talk.

He headed off through the lot exit and toward the entrance of the underground tube that led toward the southern suburbs of the nation's capital.

He noted through the corner of his eye that she was taking it all in. She was looking everywhere: out the car windows toward the rows of buildings; inside the car, at the dashboard, the dials, the controls. Several times she whispered something. In Arabic? He caught the last one. *Allah akbar.* God is wonderful.

He said, "Dispense usted, por favor. Hay que llamar mi bufete." I have to call my office.

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She watched attentively as he punched in the calling code. The face of an attractive middle-aged woman appeared on the dashboard visi. Az-Zahra jerked. "¡Que cosa. . . !"

"Beckwith Patents," said the lady on the screen in a quiet cultured voice. "May I help you?"

"D. B., Millie," said Beckwith.

"Two calls, D. B. One visitor, a new client, with an invention. I put him down for Monday at ten."

"That's fine, Millie." He cleared his throat, wondering how he could explain his companion simply and quickly to the office manager. There was no way. He said, "Emergency, Millie."

Her eyes widened briefly. "Go ahead."

"I'm headed back from Glenwood. I have a young lady in the car with me. I found her wandering around on the football field at half-time. She speaks Arabic and Spanish—no English. She has no friends or relatives in the area, and nowhere to go. We'll be in my apartment within the hour. Can you meet us?"

Millicent Rutherford sighed. "D.B. . . ."

"Millie . . ."

"All right, I'll be there."

The screen twinkled, then grew dark.

The girl stared over at him in awe. "¿La magia?"

Magic? "No. Es solamente un . . ."—he searched for a word—"visi. Un visi del car."

And now it was suddenly semi-dark, and they were in the long looping descent into the tubes. She began to breathe even faster. A few minutes later the tube computer shunted him into a line of passenger cars, and he turned off his ignition. The magnetic cables would pull them into Alexandria in half an hour.

He turned in his seat and faced his passenger. "Az-Zahra," he said bluntly, "¿Cuando nació usted?" When were you born?

She replied firmly, "Nací en el año mil doscientos y veinte."

A.D. 1220.

Either she was telling the bare-bones truth or she was the most accomplished liar he had ever encountered. "¿Cuantos años tiene usted?" How old are you?

She was equally forthright. "Dieciseis." Sixteen.

Good lord! Suddenly he foresaw all sorts of nasty possibilities. Contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Kidnapping. Smerll would love this. "¿Salió usted de Cordoba en el año mil doscientos treinta y seis?" You left Cordoba in 1236?

"Sí, es verdad."

"¿Dèrecho a Glenwood?" Straight to Glenwood?

"Sí."

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"¿Como viajó usted?" How did you travel?

"Usé mi alfombra."

Alfombra. . . ? Carpet? Rug? She used her rug? Is that what she was telling him? It made no sense. "¿Alfombra?" he repeated.

"Sí. Aquí." She held up the mat.

She was asking him to believe that she had traveled across the Atlantic on her trusty little rug. Her magic carpet. He closed his eyes briefly. I don't have enough troubles? he thought. The U.N. Resolution . . . our ship hasn't even started yet . . . we'll lose the big race to Jupiter . . . Congress will slaughter the Space Agency . . . my best client . . . they'll drop their patent program . . . in another six months I won't be able to make a payroll . . . and now this very strange juvenile female . . . and to top it all, Smerll . . . an omen?

He sighed. "Digame concerniendo su vida en Cordoba." Tell me about your life in Cordoba.

3. Az-Zahra's Story

During the trip in the tube, she described in melodious antiquated Spanish her life in Cordoba. Beckwith listened in marveling disbelief.

Her father, Hasan ibn Masud, was a member of the highest class of nobles, with a genealogy that traced back to the Prophet. Additionally, he was a very rich merchant, and owned great estates and manufactories. His ships voyaged regularly to all ports of the Mediterranean, as well as through the Pillars of Hercules and north to France, England, and Scandinavia.

Her mother had been a very great beauty. When her parents were married, the caliph himself had sent a jeweled parasol to shield her mother from the July sun as her women escorted her to the Great Mosque.

"Ah, Sidi (she told Beckwith), when I was a child, life was good in Cordoba! I played in our gardens and in our orange and olive orchards. I had the run of father's workshops. I watched them make delicate glassware in the glass shop. I rode my own pony out to the tanneries, where they made special leathers, and shoes, and jackets.

"As a child, I had no worries or fears. But as I grew older, I began to understand that there were grave threats to our idyllic existence. Over the centuries my ancestors had conquered most of Spain, but now the original owners were taking it back, city by city, province by province. They called it the *reconquista.*

"When I was twelve my father introduced me to an old man who had his own corner in the rear of one of our tapestry shops. This was al-Hakim, the wizard weaver. His eyes burned. I bowed respectfully, but I

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trembled, for I knew what was said of him. He was dumb from birth, yet he talked with djinns. He was going to teach me how to weave my own very special prayer rug. How to say? Mi alfombra de oración. Yes, this very rug that I hold here in my hands.

"Yes, very, very special. The gold and silver filaments are interwoven with other threads of special alloys. And the weave itself is of a very particular, very intricate pattern, a pattern that requires months to memorize, and which al-Hakim claimed to have invented. My father says that actually, a djinn gave it to al-Hakim in return for his soul. Be that as it may, I received all necessary instructions from him. Last year, with the help of al-Hakim I finally completed the rug. And last week, Father and I worked together, sewing the necessary jewels into the fabric. Yes, Sidi, these are real jewels. These two great star rubies, known as the Eyes of Ayesha, are valued at millions of golden dinars. And then there are the lesser emeralds, diamonds, sapphires, and so on. These have their own place in the rug pattern. In addition to these, I have a bag of other gems, which my father hung about my neck before I left.

"When all is ready, the rug is activated. One covers one's body with the rug and whirls seven times. When the rubies begin to flash, one places the rug on the floor with the minrah pointing toward Mecca and stands on the rug. And now what happens depends upon certain loose threads in the rug. If one wishes to move *backward* in time, one merely waits. In a moment, the person simply . . . vanishes. On the other hand, if the person wishes to move *forward* in time, as I did, one makes certain changes in the threads. And if one wishes to take the rug along on the journey, one simply holds on to the rug edges with both hands, as I did. In that way, the person will bring the rug along to whenever . . . and wherever . . . the person goes."

So she left Cordoba, thought Beckwith. Somehow. Somewhen. Maybe. But why? He sensed that she was about to tell him why. But just now was a bad time. "Ahora, hay que interrumpir," he said. "Vamonos detras de los tubos, en las calles. Detras, hay muchos coches, hay que tengo cuidado. Comprende?" Have to interrupt, leaving the tubes and going out into traffic. I have to be careful.

"Sí, Sidi."

And next, the confrontation with Millie Rutherford, and no possible explanation. But at least Millie could stay for supper, and perhaps more importantly, explain to this young woman by a combination of demonstration and sign language, how to work the things in the bathroom.

Thank God the housekeeper would be in in the morning. There would be no credible explanation to offer Mrs. Kuiper, either, but at least she could be there for the day while he went off to the office. Maybe Kuiper could come in as a sort of live-in chaperone. Just temporary, of course. Until they could all decide what to do with this strange child of time.

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* * *

Working together, Beckwith and Millicent Rutherford eventually got az-Zahra settled in the little guest room for the night. The office manager left, and sometime after midnight the lawyer retired to his own bed and drifted into fitful sleep.

He was awakened by a noise. He sat up, disoriented at first, but then everything came back with a rush.

The sounds were coming from the guest room. Az-Zahra? Singing? No, more like a muffled wailing.

"La . . . la . . . . la . . ." No . . . no . . . no . . . Arabic, he thought as he grabbed his robe, was one of the few languages where "no" didn't begin with "n."

A moment later he was in her room, and bending over the bed. He didn't turn on the light, but he could make out the outlines of her face from the hall luminar. Her cheeks were wet. As he crouched there, silent, her breathing subsided into something fairly regular. Obviously she had been having a nightmare. Dreaming of what horrors? He was glad he didn't know.

4. To Class

On the second day of her arrival Beckwith drove her around downtown Alexandria, and she was enchanted.

"Christ Church," he pointed out. "Jorge Washington worshipped there."

"Jorge . . . Washington?"

There we go again, he thought. Even toddlers in distant Tibet know about George Washington, the Father of his Country.

There was one area, though, where history was irrelevant. "¿Tiene hambre?" Are you hungry?

"¡Sí!"

He pulled in to the parking lot at a nearby McDonald's and they went inside together. He had already decided he was not going to try to explain all the myriad possibilities on the menu. Next month, maybe. He ordered cheeseburgers, vanilla milkshakes, and french fries. No knives, forks, or spoons would be needed. He took the trays and led her to a corner booth. After absorbing her surroundings with wide eyes, she turned her attention back to him. She watched him carefully and tried to imitate his actions. Open the little capsules of ketchup. Okay to lick the fingers. Some on the hamburger. Some for the fries. Now for the milkshake. Take the paper off the soda straws. Two straws are best. No, don't blow. Chupe. Suck. Now, hold the hamburger carefully with both hands, like so. Ambos manos.

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She watched him, and then she took a tentative bite. "Bueno," she murmured politely. "Muy bueno."

Afterward, as they were walking to the car, she declared, "¡Que almuerzo rico! ¡Muchas gracias!"

He smiled. So what if she was just being super-courteous? That was fine with him. "De nada," he said.

He immediately engaged Mrs. Kuiper as a full-time housekeeper and companion for his new charge, and within the next couple of days he found English teachers for her in a professional office building a short walk from the apartment complex. As soon as her English was adequate, he'd have to find a private finishing school for girls, and start thinking about college. He was determined to get her into the mainstream as soon as possible.

During her first week in English class, Mrs. Kuiper walked with her to the professional building, waited for her in the office, and returned with her.

During that first walk az-Zahra had been awed. She had made Mrs. Kuiper stop in front of one of the first shop windows. Inside, a fully dressed mannequin was walking and talking. The robot would take a few steps, then would turn to show the back of the dress, then would face the window again, meanwhile talking, apparently explaining something about the dress. And she did this over and over again. Az-Zahra looked appealingly at Mrs. Kuiper, who knew neither Arabic nor Spanish, and could explain nothing. And so, mutually frustrated, they walked on.

She stopped Mrs. Kuiper several more times, generally in front of windows occupied by beautifully clothed life-size very thin holographic ladies.

Early in the second week she insisted that she was able to walk to class alone. Her English was still rough and sketchy (she agreed), but it was good enough to get her there and back.

After a long discussion with Mrs. Kuiper, Beckwith yielded. Mrs. Kuiper explained about muggers and not talking to strangers. Beckwith buckled an unobtrusive stun laser around her wrist and made an arrangement with the school secretary to call Mrs. Kuiper as soon as az-Zahra arrived.

"It's only twenty minutes," Beckwith warned sternly. "So don't loiter."

"*Loiter?*"

"Delay. Don't waste time getting to class. Go straight there."

"Twenty minutes not much time," she said serenely. "Need more. Màs tiempo."

"Whatever for?" he demanded.

"To . . . see."

"Mr. Beckwith," Mrs. Kuiper explained quietly, "there are several ladies' boutiques along the way."

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"Oh. I see. Well . . ."

Her English improved rapidly. She could stand in front of a shop window, watch the mannequins make their elegant affected circuits, and understand much of the oral and printed sales pitches.

She was especially excited by the animated demonstrations of one of the flimsier exhibits. It was all very beautiful and very enticing. What would Sidi Daniel think if perchance if he should see her . . . in those *things?* Did he ever think of her . . . that way? She tore herself away and walked on.

That night, back in the apartment, when they were engaged in their respective labors in the library, she looked over at the lawyer. "Sidi, permission to interrupt?"

"Of course."

"What is bikini?"

"Bikini." He looked at her dubiously. "Bikini? Hm. I guess you mean the Bikini Atoll, a circle of coral in the Pacific Ocean. They held a nuclear test there, many years ago."

"I think not that, Sidi. Could it mean something else?"

Mrs. Kuiper stood in the doorway, drying her hands on her apron. "Zahra dear," she called in sweetly, "could you help me in the kitchen a moment?"

"Sí. Dispense vuestra merced, Sidi." Az-Zahra followed the older woman into the kitchen, where there ensued a clarification. "Mr. Beckwith is a good, decent man," concluded Mrs. Kuiper, "but he *is* a man. There are certain things we do not discuss with him." She sniffed delicately. "We don't want to put temptation before him, do we, dear?"

"No, desde luego," az-Zahra lied cheerfully. Of course not. Well, well, she thought. So *that* is how it is done. She would get some of those strange diaphanous things. For this she would need money. She thought of her bag of jewels. She would sell one or two. She had noted a jeweler's shop in the professional building.

She spent much time thinking about him . . . Sidi walking, talking, moving about, driving the car, working at the library table in the parlor. Ah, Sidi . . .

5. The Race

"I have to fly out to Los Angeles, in California, from time to time," Beckwith explained to az-Zahra one evening at supper. "I have a very important client there, the United States Space Agency."

"I know name, S.A.," she acknowledged. "From holo screen. Big race to

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moon of Jupiter, Ganymede. Our ship, *Kennedy,* left Moon this morning, many days late. Say S.A. much worried, may lose race."

Worried indeed, he thought. And so am I!

"But why Ganymede so importante?" she asked.

"It's the best candidate of any of the Jovian moons for colonizing," explained Beckwith. "It's big, bigger than the planet Mercury. It's about fifty-fifty rock and water. The water is mostly ice, but underground some is probably in liquid form, due to heat from radioactivity in the rocky core. Whoever wins can recover oxygen from the water by electrolysis."

He wasn't surprised when she held up a hand. "'El . . . ecktro. . . ?'"

He smiled. "Az-Zahra, Ganymede es una luna de gran valor. Por eso, los barcos de muchos naciones van alli ahora con gran velocidad. El primo a poner su bandera allí, gana la carrera y todo Ganymede." Ganymede is a very valuable moon. The first country that puts its flag on Gorbachev Crater on Ganymede wins the race and the whole moon.

An hour later they took the elevator down to street level. "Come," he said. He took her by the hand and led her toward the back entrance of the building. "Let us go outside for a little while, into the garden. It is especially pretty at night."

Outside, in the light of stars and a quarter moon, they walked down terrace steps to a bench facing a fountain bordered by hedges. Here they sat together and for a while watched the noisy moonlight antics of the splashing waters.

She looked up at the stars for a few minutes, craning her neck back and forth. Then she pointed. "Jupiter?"

He studied the twinkling point of light. "Why yes, I believe it is."

"Far away?"

"Very far."

"Ships take long time?"

"It depends on what you mean by a long time. Time in flight for the fastest ships is about ninety days. That may seem like a long time, but you have to compare it to the very first flights, sixty or seventy years ago—the Pioneers and Voyagers. The fastest required nineteen months. Of course, they had little or no additional chemical thrust, once they blasted off from Earth."

"Russians will win?" she said.

"Perhaps. For us to put a man there first we'd need your magic carpet." As soon as he said it, he wished he hadn't: It could be taken as a declaration that he doubted her story.

She wrapped her arms around her chest as though suddenly feeling the chill. In a very low voice, she said, "You do not believe me, Sidi?"

Oh hell, he thought. "I believe you, az-Zahra," he said lamely. "And it's getting cold. We'd better go in."

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6. Rothstein

Beckwith and az-Zahra were sitting in Beckwith's office looking at the two biggest jewels. The lawyer shook his head slowly. "Surely they're not genuine?"

"I believe true rubies," she said.

"I think we ought to find out for sure. There was a chap in appraising the jewelry in the Londale estate. Eccentric . . . tends to ramble . . . expensive. But he specializes in rubies." He flipped a switch to open an outside line. "Dr. Aaron Rothstein." They listened as the phonocomputer found the number and made the connection.

"Rothstein," said the answer machine blandly. "State your business and leave your number."

"My name is Daniel Beckwith. I'm a lawyer, my client has some gems, including two rather large red stones that may be rubies. From present information, they originated in Cordoba, Spain. We—"

"Mr. Beckwith?" said a raspy voice from the phone set.

The lawyer was startled. "Yes? Dr. Rothstein?"

"Yeah. Cordoba, you said?"

"That's correct."

There was a pause, as though the speaker was trying to be totally noncommittal. "You've seen the stones, Mr. Beckwith?"

"Yes. They're here on the desk, right in front of me."

"Do you see anything unusual about them?"

"Well, I don't know as you could call it unusual. However, if they were sapphires, I'd call them star sapphires."

"It's called asterism, Mr. Beckwith. Is that what you see?"

"Yes."

"Is your client sitting there with you?"

"She is. Shall we turn on the visi?"

"No. You say she's from Cordoba?"

"Yes."

"Ask her if she has ever heard of an Arabian gentleman named Masud ibn Malik."

"Whatever for?"

"Just do it, Mr. Beckwith."

The lawyer swiveled around to the girl. "Az-Zahra, you heard his question . . .?"

"Masud . . . ibn . . . Malik?" she repeated slowly.

"Yes."

"Fué mi abuelo—my grandfather."

"She claims he was her grandfather," said Beckwith.

"Well, well . . ."

"So?" demanded the lawyer.

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"The gentleman in question died sometime about A.D. 1200," said Rothstein dryly.

"Look, Rothstein, if you don't want to take the case, just say so."

"Not so fast. I will take the case."

That stopped the lawyer. "You will?"

"Yes. Come on over."

Beckwith had pictured Rothstein as some sort of shriveled gnome, something like a Wagnerian Nibelung, burrowing away in a dim-lit den and clutching his treasures to his chest. He was agreeably surprised to find a tall erect man with white Lincolnesque beard, blue eyes, and wearing a spotless full length lab coat. After the introductions the expert motioned his guests over to his work desk, and they took chairs on the other side.

The lawyer handed over both stones, and Rothstein examined them cursorily with a loupe. After this he took one of the stones and placed it in an auto lab balance. The oscillations damped very quickly. He read the LED output. "8.021 grams. That translates to 41 carats. Hm. I have to inform you, Mr. Beckwith, the largest know gem-ruby is 10-plus carats. Larger uncut stones are known, of course." He weighed the other stone. "It's 8.02. An identical twin, one might say."

He stopped for a moment, stared at the gems, then placed one under a modified microscope. "Crystal habit checks. Hexagonal. And we see the striae, characteristic microscopic scratches left by the emery dust used in grinding. That's the way they did it up until about 1300, when the best artisans switched to diamond dust. Emery grinding is easily faked, though." He shrugged. "But not asterism."

"So they're genuine?" asked Beckwith.

The appraiser looked up at him almost curiously, then arose from the work bench and walked to a bookshelf behind him. He searched the volumes a moment, then pulled down one. "Hmm. Yes. De Laniel, *Les Lapidaires Arabes*. My Renaissance French is terrible, but here's the sense of what I think the passage says. Two unusually large star rubies were found in Burma about A.D. 1000, sold to a jewel merchant in Persia, where they were cut *en cabochon*, sold to the imperial treasurer in Baghdad a few years later, and then lost to view temporarily. They were supposed to have been taken from the caliph's vaults when Toghrul the Seljuk seized Baghdad in 1055. After that, like all great stones, they migrated to the money, which at that time was in Byzantium. And now we go to Cordoba, in Hispania. A very famous Cordoban lapidary named Masud ibn Malik was hired to fashion a dazzling coronation crown for Alexis III of Byzantium. He duly made and delivered the crown. As payment he accepted two great identical star rubies, cut *en cabochon*. And there the story ends. According to De Laniel the stones disappeared when Fer-

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dinand of Castile sacked the town in 1236. They have not been seen since."

Beckwith was watching az-Zahra covertly. She had turned very pale.

Rothstein continued. "We are fortunate in that De Laniel has provided an unusually precise description. We have been able to feed this into the computer, and for what it's worth, here's what those two stones probably looked like." He clicked a toggle on the instrument and indicated the monitor screen. "According to De Laniel, they were well known in Islamic circles as—"

Az-Zahra gasped. "¡Los ojos! ¡Los ojos de Ayesha!"

Rothstein spoke directly to her. "Have you ever seen a light shine in the stones?"

She nodded vigorously. "¡Sí! Djinns live in the stones and awaken when I use the rug."

The jewel expert stared at her for a long moment. Finally he turned off the monitor. "Yes, truly the Eyes of Ayesha. Good God. In the business forty years . . . I never expected . . . Ironic, really. Ayesha was the favorite of the Prophet Mohammed, but she died centuries before the stones entered history." He replaced the stones in the little black bag and handed it to Beckwith. "I'll send you a notarized certificate in the morning. And a bit of advice, my innocent friends."

"Yes?"

"Insure these things right away."

"For how much?"

"How do you put a value on something priceless? Oh well, try something nominal, like twenty-five million per stone."

Beckwith felt a sudden pain in his stomach. How much was the annual premium on fifty million dollars' worth of rubies, not to mention az-Zahra's other gems? And should he get coverage on the djinns also? He gurgled, "Yes, a good idea."

7. A Demonstration

Next evening, in the apartment, she said, "Sidi, I show you a . . . algo . . . thing."

"Of course. Go ahead."

"With rug. First, have you things you no want?"

"Well, I guess so. Sure. There's the wastebasket. Some old newspapers, bottle, soda can, empty envelopes . . . a broken belt. Why?"

"For show you." She picked up the wastebasket and brought it back to the rug, then picked up the rug. "On true hajj, pilgrim walk around Kaaba seven times. So I hold rug, vuelvo . . . turn, seven times." And, holding the fabric to her chest, she began to revolve.

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Beckwith watched, fascinated. He was beginning to grasp what was going on. The metal filaments in the rug were cutting the lines of force of the earth's magnetic field and generating emf in the filaments. The turning rug was functioning like a dynamo.

The two rubies fastened in the rug began to flash intermittently. How could this be, he wondered. Yet, he had to concede that the phenomenon was not a physical or electrical impossibility. He had read somewhere of such things. Would *she* know? "Why do they light up?" he asked.

She explained as she rotated. "Djinns awaken."

"Oh." Of course.

She stopped and laid the rug on the floor.

And now the current must stop, he thought. The djinns will go back to sleep. But no. The eyes are still flashing. So what is going on? Are some of those filaments superconductors? Even at room temperature?

"Now," she said, "put . . . puesto . . . los algos desagradables on rug. Sidi, watch! ¡Mire!" She upended the wastebasket and everything hit the surface of the rug—and vanished.

Beckwith jumped. "Wha—? Where did it go?"

She regarded him calmly. "El oceano atlántico, I think. With un astrolabio, say exactly."

"You can do this every time?"

"Of course."

"This is how you came here?"

"Yes, Sidi. I fell thus into el campo . . . the field of football."

He thought about that. "In your little demonstration just now the rug stayed behind, but when you entered the football field the rug came along with you."

"I held it tightly, and it came with me. As I explained, when the car was in the tubes. Perhaps Sidi did not then understand."

"Perhaps I didn't." Yes, she had said something like that. So it was all true. She was indeed born in Cordoba in 1220. And in 1236 she had gathered up her jewels, said goodbye to her family and friends, and she had mounted this magic carpet, and she had—flown?—from thirteenth-century Spain to that football field in Virginia. *Why?*

He said bluntly, "We have to talk. We'll start with you. What does 'Zahra' mean in Arabic?"

"It's *az*-Zahra, Sidi, and it means 'The Shining One.' My father named me." Her voice slowed.

"When was the last time you saw your father?"

The response was very soft. The lawyer had to lean forward to hear her.

"He was on the south wall. The Spaniards had brought up a siege tower, and at the top their captain was screaming, and waving Ferdinand's red-and-yellow banner." She paused, as though thinking back. "I hate men with flags."

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"I can imagine. Go on."

"Father waited, with al-Saffah and a squad of eight men, just shopkeepers and clerks. I knew all of them. Dozens of barbarians were climbing the tower."

"Al-Saffah? A comrade?"

" 'Al-Saffah' means 'blood spiller' . . . his sword. Very famous, very old."

"You did not stay?"

"No. I wanted to stay and die with him, but he forbade it. He required that I take the rug and leave. Days before, he had made me swear on the sacred Koran that I would do this."

"This was . . . 1236?"

"Yes, Sidi."

"And at that time, nowhere in Europe or Asia or Africa was the existence of the Americas suspected?"

"As to that, I cannot be sure, your grace. At the university—"

"The University of Cordoba?"

She brightened. "Yes. You know about it?"

"Of course. At the time, the greatest seat of learning in Spain, perhaps in Europe. So, what did they say at the university?"

"Well, at the university we had a very learned philosopher and maker of maps, Busir ibn Murad. Busir claimed the world was round—a sphere—and that there must be a tremendous land mass far to the west, across the Atlantic Ocean. He said this land was necessary to balance the three continents of the known world. The northmen had already touched the shores of this new land, he said. He was referring to the voyages of Eric the Red and his son Leif. We had the Norse Sagas in our library. You have read them, of course?"

"Ah? Well, yes, I think so. So then, when you left Cordoba that terrible day, you were aiming your magic carpet at the Americas?"

"Yes, although I did not know the name America then."

"Did you know it would be eight hundred years?"

"Yes. I knew how to control the time djinns."

"Time . . . djinns?"

"The spirits of the rug."

"Oh, of course. Why did you pick the great land on the other side of your world?"

"I chose this land to be far away from the Spaniards. I understand I did not completely succeed." She smiled wryly.

"True, you didn't. Spain has a long and brilliant history in the Americas. But how about that eight hundred years? Why go into the future at all?"

"I had hoped, your grace, that the passage of so many years would bring me into a world of peace and harmony, where men do not kill each other anymore."

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He regarded her glumly. Sorry to disappoint you, he thought. So that's her story. I believe it. And now back to the real world. She's *here,* with an idea that can solve a lot of the world's problems: nuclear waste, carcinogens, smokestack effluent, auto exhaust. Is this the ultimate answer to pollution? This thing had possibilities. How to make money with it? Think of patents, commercial uses, licenses. "You can drop *anything* through the rug?"

"Anything."

"You made the rug yourself?"

"Yes."

"You could make another?"

"Any number. But I need special loom, and filaments of certain metal alloys. Metals very special. And not sure about rubies. May need star stones, perhaps as big as Eyes of Ayesha."

That could indeed be a problem, he thought. But at least we should be able to find the right metals. But could she really recall the exact alloy compositions for all the different filaments?

And then there would be the question of how they were all woven into the warp and woof of the rug. He tapped his forehead. "Do you remember everything, up here?"

"Yes, Sidi."

It was all coming together. Maybe this explains the flying carpet stories in the *Arabian Nights.* We'll feed this design into a robocomputer. We'll weave hundreds of these things—*thousands*—all automatically, by machine. How do we keep our monopoly? We'll need a good strong patent structure.

"Sidi?"

He blinked. "Ah—?"

"What are you thinking about?"

"Well, to start, we are going to file a patent application on your rug."

"Patent. . . ?"

"Yes. Let me explain. Say you have an invention, in this case your rug design. You write down a careful description of the invention. You present this description to the Patent Office. If the Patent Office thinks you have something new, useful, and unobvious, they will give you a document called a patent. And for a certain term of years other people cannot use your invention legally without your consent."

"Ah, I like that."

"We'll fix up a place for you to work, here in the apartment," he said. "I'll get you a drafting table, instruments, paper, raw materials, everything you need. You can draw a diagram of the filaments, how they attach to the rubies, and so on. For the patent we'll need everything in detail."

She grinned. "Sí, Sidi. As you wish!"

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8. The Workshop

For az-Zahra's workshop Beckwith cleaned out the storage room near her bedroom and installed various facilities, including an electric induction furnace for melting alloys, wire drawing equipment, computers programmable for auto-weaving, lapidary tools, a Verneuil furnace for making synthetic gems, plumbing, an exhaust hood for fumes.

When all was ready he watched with great interest as she connected the twenty-one shuttles with the different metal filaments into the coarse woolen weft of the little protoloom, plugged the circuitry program into the robocomputer, and flipped the switch.

The assembly came alive. Threads glinted and vibrated and sang, and a handkerchief-size mat began to grow, centimeter by centimeter.

They watched in silence.

Soon, the loom shut off. Save for jewels, the thing was finished.

Beckwith studied the newly created artifact. "There seem to be several loose filament ends."

"I know. They are to be interconnected in specific ways, depending on the location intended for the transported objects, and whether you are going backward or forward in time, or simply moving in the present. As you can see, it all depends on the wiring."

He took a deep breath. "Of course."

9. Az-Zahra Analyzes the Race

"I have studied once more the matter of the race to Jupiter," az-Zahra announced to Beckwith a few days later.

He looked up from the library table. "Indeed?"

"Yes. I have been reading much, and I have found that the racing ships are driven by different djinns."

"Well—"

"I will explain to you. The djinn of the German ship is the fleetest. He is called a hydrogen ram jet. Hydrogen, Sidi, is a very tiny speck of matter, and there's not much out there in space."

"I know. Very scarce."

"At first the German djinn moves only slowly, so he is no able to eat much hydrogen. But as he gathers speed, he begins to gulp hydrogen like a wolf, and that makes him go faster and faster, until he is finally devouring hydrogen like a ravenous lion. Soon he is traveling at half the speed of light."

"That's pretty fast."

"There is nothing faster than light, Sidi. But the German djinn, for all his speed, will not win the race."

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"No? Why not?"

"Two reasons. Long before he gets up to his greatest speed, he must start slowing down, or else he will go far far beyond Ganymede. Before he is really ready, he must start to de . . . de . . . Como?"

"Decelerate."

"Decelerate. His great speed is good for journeys between the stars, but it does not help much between planets."

"Good point. What's the other reason he won't win?"

"I cast his horoscope last night. It says he loses."

"Interesting. Well, I guess that settles *him*. How about the French? Their ship uses a solar sail."

"I know. A sail is of course the most reliable of all. On the other hand, a sail-djinn is also the slowest. No, he cannot win."

"And then we have the Russians," said Beckwith. "Their ship is very fast and is specially designed for travel between the planets."

"Yes, and they're ahead now. Their djinn eats a thing called antimatter. It gives him fantastic strength, so that he can move the *Gagarin* at one-fifth the speed of light."

"Will they win?"

"I do not know. The horoscope is not clear."

"Well, that leaves America's ship, the *John F. Kennedy*. How do *we* look?"

"Again, Sidi, not clear. Our djinn makes a magic thing called lithium-five, and then he eats it, and it gives him great strength, so that he can move our ship at three-tenths the speed of light. But our ship left the base late, and I fear we cannot make up the lost time." She studied his face. "This race is very important to you?"

He shrugged. There was no need to explain *how* important.

"Why were we so late, Sidi?"

He had got it in strict confidence from friends at the Agency. President Mugram was determined that his nephew Robin would plant the American flag. Unfortunately Robin had come down with mumps the day before the scheduled take-off. The flight was put on hold for two weeks.

Beckwith hated poor Robin with all his heart.

"There was . . . illness."

She did not press him further.

10. Smerll's Headquarters

Persons visiting the Ethics Section of the Metropolitan Bar Committee would find nothing unusual in the outer offices. One encountered first an amiable gray-haired receptionist, who might direct the visitor to one of the side offices, where the resident investigators worked. The central areas were occupied by secretaries, files, and miscellaneous office equipment.

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Off to one side, facing the Federal Courthouse, was Room 1313, the Hearing Room. Despite air-conditioning, the room smelled of death.

This thirteenth floor of the Bar Building was the micro-empire of Irwin Smerll, which he ruled from a corner office in the rear.

Most of the wall space in Smerll's office was covered with framed epigrams printed in heavy black letters. If the light was just right, a visitor with 20/20 vision could read some of them from Smerll's doorway.

The first said:

Let a man write but seven words, I can hang him.
—Cardinal Richelieu.

Next:

My desire is, that mine adversary had written a book.
—Job, 31:35.

Moving on around:

A fool's mouth is his destruction.
—Proverbs, 18:7.

Then a solid exhibit, mounted and framed: a thirty-two automatic, now empty, of course, and the barrel sealed. Under it the legend, "The suicide weapon used by W. Matthew Rood (formerly Esquire), the day following his disbarment."

Then more epigrammata:

Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee.
—Luke, 19:22.

Vengeance, like virtue, is its own reward.
—Lucinus Pater, *Fragment 21*

And finally, not an epigram, but a list. Inspection revealed eighteen names of persons once members of the Metropolitan Bar, and the dates of their disbarment or other destruction. There was room at the bottom for several more names, and a very close inspection would reveal (written very lightly in pencil) the initials "D.B." The date was blank.

Smerll operated his section on the theory that a crooked lawyer subconsciously wanted to be caught. It was ironic, he thought, and it was tragic, but it was all very true. And good to know. Because sooner or later the errant attorney would send Ethics a gilt-edged invitation to discover him in the very act of his malfeasance. In most cases all Smerll had to do was watch, wait, and pounce. And that, he told himself, is how I will eventually get you, Mr. Lily-white Beckwith.

And sure enough—out of the blue—enter the Arabian courtesan. He remembered her from the Glenwood football game. Was she really just sixteen? Is this a genuine case of contributing to the delinquency of a minor? Or even (dared he hope?) of statutory rape?

Smerll was sitting at his desk and wondering if he had enough to disbar Beckwith, when his secret watch service on Beckett's docket in the Patent Office faxed him a copy of az-Zahra's patent application.

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"It's *her!*" he muttered ungrammatically to himself. He sat down to read. He read every word, some of them twice. "Flying carpet?" he whispered. "Colossal deliberate fraud!" He lifted his eyes to heaven, and he said, "O Lord, I thank thee."

11. The Notice

METROPOLITAN BAR COMMITTEE
Bar Building, Washington, DC
NOTICE OF HEARING

Greetings to Daniel Beckwith, Esq.

Pursuant to Bar Regulations 36(a) as revised a Hearing will be held in the Hearing Room of the Ethics Section of the Committee one week from your receipt hereof, beginning at nine A.M. and continuing.

The purpose of the hearing is to receive information:

(a) Generally with respect to the fitness of Daniel Beckwith (herein, "Beckwith") to continue as a member of the Metropolitan Bar; and

(b) Specifically with respect to the following questions.

1. Is Beckwith contributing to the delinquency of a female minor, viz., one az-Zahra?

2. Is Beckwith guilty of statutory rape with respect to said az-Zahra?

3. Has Beckwith unlawfully converted to his own use and behoof assets belonging to said az-Zahra?

4. Has Beckwith aided and abetted illegal entry of the said az-Zahra into the United States?

5. Should said az-Zahra be deported?

6. Has Beckwith conspired with said az-Zahra to smuggle jewels into the United States in violation of 18 USC 545?

7. Has Beckwith filed an application for letters patent in the United States Patent Office, to wit, Serial Number 2537, for Rug, filled with numerous statements that Beckwith knows to be utterly false, deceptive, and misleading?

8. Should said Serial Number 2537 be stricken as fraudulent? (Reference 35 USC 6 and 37 CFR 1.56.)

9. Should Beckwith be stricken from the Register of Patent Attorneys?

10. Should Beckwith be stricken from the Metropolitan Bar?

11. Should Beckwith be referred to the District Attorney for presentation to the Grand Jury?

Within thirty days following the Hearing, the Ethics Section may make recommendations pursuant to Bar regulation 36(b) as to further proceedings, if any.

[signed] *Irwin Smerll*
Director, Ethics Section

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It was hand-delivered.

Beckwith's initial reaction was amazement. For the first time in his life he began to grasp the dimensions of Smerll's hatred.

His second reaction was dissociation. This couldn't be happening to him. Smerll must mean someone else.

It took him a full half-hour to reorganize his thoughts and to focus on reality. At least it temporarily took his mind off problems looming with the Space Agency.

He considered the mechanics of his defense. Be there, of course. Argue. Contest each and every charge. And meanwhile the Russian ship was still way ahead of the *John F. Kennedy*.

Everything was piling up.

12. Scheherazade

At ten o'clock on the night before the hearing Beckwith retired to his bedroom with the Notice, a shot glass, a bottle of brandy, and a copy of *Les Miserables*. Both the brandy and the great work by Hugo were mementos of events some six years earlier. He had been reading the book, but had laid it aside to cram for the bar exam. In a simultaneous burst of optimism he had bought the brandy with the idea that he would consume a reasonable amount if he passed the bar. He had indeed passed the bar, but in moving from his single room to this apartment the bottle had been stored away, and he had never done his duty by it.

He actually disliked alcohol. It befuddled him. In lunches and dinners with clients he always had ginger ale in lieu of a cocktail. So, he thought as he broke the seal on the bottle, I wonder what this is going to do to me?

At nearly midnight Mrs. Kuiper donned bathrobe and slippers and hurried down the hall to az-Zahra's room. She knocked once, hesitated, then entered. Simultaneously the night light came on inside.

"I heard it too," whispered the girl as she pulled on her robe. "Sidi?"

"Yes."

"Come," said az-Zahra. She glided out ahead of the other woman.

A moment later they were standing in the hall outside Beckwith's door. Below the door a thin slice of light shone out. They listened to the singer on the other side. The chant rose and fell.

"What is he singing?" asked the girl.

"It's something they learn in the military," said Mrs. Kuiper. "When they do their duty year, you know. Except he's changing some of the words. You ought not listen to this, dear."

"He's stopped."

"Maybe he's finally gone to bed," speculated the housekeeper.

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"No, he's moving around. Listen!" Shouts and curses from inside made the door vibrate. They heard the sound of breaking furniture.

Mrs. Kuiper began wringing her hands. "He has a hearing in the morning. This is terrible!"

A shout vibrated the door. "Smerll, you foul rascal, I see you! Take *that!*"

They heard the shattering of glass.

"Oh dear god!" moaned Mrs. Kuiper. "He shot the mirror!"

"He has a laser?"

"Kept in the drawer in the night table. Oh, poor Mr. Beckwith!"

From inside: "Damn you, Smerll! You won't get away this time!"

A hole appeared in the hall wall over the door.

"He's going to kill us all!" shrieked Mrs. Kuiper. She turned away. "I'm going to call the police!"

She found that her wrist was locked within iron talons.

"You will do nothing of the sort," az-Zahra said coolly. "I know what to do. I'm going in there."

"He'll kill you," stammered the other.

"He will not harm me. He loves me."

"He'll . . . rape you," faltered Mrs. Kuiper.

"We won't call it that." She released the older woman's wrist. "Now listen, Mrs. Kuiper, you and I are going to get him to his hearing tomorrow, and we're going to get him there bright and alert and on time. Here's what we do. I'm going to put him to bed. He's going to get some sleep. I'll have him up by eight, shaved, showered, and dressed. I'll bring him in to you. You will have a good breakfast waiting for him. Waffles and sausage. Coffee, very strong. A little glass of orange juice, with two aspirin at the side. And would you please call tonight and reserve a taxi. We'd like to leave here at eight-thirty."

Mrs. Kuiper listened to the calm imperious tones and looked into the regal gray-green eyes, and she realized that the past five minutes had brought a subtle shifting of the power structure within the Beckwith household. In a way, she was glad. It was a great relief to have someone take over. "Yes, miss," she said quietly.

"Now go on back to bed," said az-Zahra. "Set your alarm for seven-thirty. I'll see you in the morning."

She opened Beckwith's door, slipped inside, and closed the door behind her.

Mrs. Kuiper lingered a moment to listen. She heard a few words, then nothing. After a moment she shrugged, then padded off to bed.

Inside, az-Zahra surveyed the wreckage of man and room.

He was standing there, looking at her. The laser dangled in his hand. A chair lay at the bedside, broken in several pieces. The mirror on his bathroom door was shattered.

She said, "Sidi, may I come in?"

He grunted something unintelligible.

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"Thank you." She walked closer. "Let me help you with your shirt." She began with the top buttons. "The laser, Daniel. You'll have to put it down so I can manage the sleeve. There, that's it. Now, you'd best sit down. Here, on the bed. I'll take your shoes. Up again, now. Belt . . . trousers . . . There we go."

"Zahra?"

"Yes, Daniel?"

"What the hell do you think are you doing?"

"I am undressing you. You are going to get into your pajamas, and you are going to bed, and to sleep. You have a hearing tomorrow morning."

"Hearing?"

"A very important hearing. You have got to get to bed."

"To hell with the hearing. And you can't stay in here."

"Daniel, dear friend. I *am* here, and I am staying. I know what I am doing. I have had the special training. I know all the things a woman should know. I was to enter the harem of the caliph, but it never came to pass. I never told you."

"But you . . . you're a virgin!"

"My hymen was surgically cut as part of the training. There will be no blood." She made a graceful, almost nonchalant motion of her shoulders. Her night clothes dropped to a limp circle about her feet.

"Lordy!" muttered Daniel Beckwith, Esq.

An hour later they lay together in the dark, with her head nestled in the crook of his arm. "It doesn't really matter," he said glumly. "The hearing is like a chess game. You win . . . you lose . . . Robin had mumps . . . the Space Agency collapses . . . the universe rolls merrily on."

"You must not talk in that way, Daniel my love. We will fight, and we will win."

"Why should we fight, Zahra?"

"Because I am your woman."

"You're not making sense. I am twice as old as you. We will find a younger man for you."

"I am nearly seventeen, and you are not much over thirty. I do not want to marry a beardless boy, I want you." After a moment, she added with quiet conviction, "And you want me." She waited, but there was no response. "Darling?"

He was asleep, and he was breathing slowly, deeply, rhythmically.

13. The Hearing

Mrs. Kuiper was waiting by the breakfast table with great anticipation.

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Beckwith entered first. "Morning," he mumbled. He settled slowly and carefully into his chair.

"Good morning, sir," she said cheerfully. She checked him out quickly. As promised, he was delivered to the table shaved, showered, and impeccably dressed. The only indications of an eventful night were slight bags under his eyes.

Counselor Beckwith downed the two aspirin with the orange juice, and poured a cup of coffee from the carafe.

The housekeeper said cautiously, "Will the young lady be joining us?"

"Right here, Mrs. Kuiper," declared az-Zahra. She gave the older woman a sparkling smile. "And a beautiful good morning to you!"

Mrs. Kuiper stared. Her first thought was—this is not az-Zahra, this is somebody else. This radiant woman cannot be yesterday's child! But of course it was so. Az-Zahra, the Shining One.

The girl had combed her light red-gold hair into long locks that fell about her shoulders. She wore a skirt and jacket in matching pastel greens. Her lips and cheeks were their own natural pink.

Mrs. Kuiper gulped and looked over at Beckwith. Did he see what she saw? Obviously not. The man must be blind.

The newcomer leaned over the table and picked up a muffin. "I don't want much, and I've got some things to do before we go. Mrs. K, were you able to reserve a taxi for eight-thirty?"

"Yes, miss. They swore they'd have one at the entrance."

"Good. Thank you. Now, can you help me down the hall a moment? We'll let Sidi finish his breakfast in peace."

"Of course."

Out of earshot, az-Zahra spoke softly to the older woman. "He had a bad night, but he's fine now. After we're gone, would you mind calling the custodian about the broken glass. And also call the furniture store. Perhaps you can find a nice replacement for the chair?"

"I'll take care of everything."

The girl finished the muffin and wiped her fingers on the napkin Mrs. Kuiper handed her. "I have to pick up Sidi's brief case and a canvas bag in the library. Then we're ready to go."

A group was standing around the holo in the reception room as they entered the Ethics Section. Beckwith heard one of the men say quietly, "The *Gagarin* has now synchronized with Ganymede." Someone said, "Yeah, they're decelerating, moving in."

"Come on," he mumbled morosely to the girl. They brushed past. Beyond, in the bay, they sensed office doors easing open behind them, and then the quiet scuffling of shoes, especially high heels, all against a barely noticeable wash of muffled whispers.

They entered the Hearing Room at exactly nine. Save for Irwin Smerll,

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the room was empty. Beckwith was not surprised. Evidently the Ethics Director intended to hold center stage.

As soon as they were seated Smerll began. (Straight out of the Manual, thought Beckwith.) "This Hearing is convened pursuant to lawful Notice, and is for the purpose of considering the matters stated in that Notice. Parties giving testimony are allowed considerable informality. However, in case of specific objections, the Federal Rules of Evidence will be followed." He looked down the table toward Beckwith. "Are there any questions or comments?"

"Yes." Beckwith stood up. "For the record I note attendance of az-Zahra, my fiancée and assistant."

The young woman rose and bowed modestly. As they sat down she whispered, "Fiancée? We're to be married?"

He whispered back, "Yes. I'm after your money. Now be quiet."

Under the table she rubbed his leg with a slipperless foot.

Smerll acknowledged the introduction curtly. "May we now begin? Very well. We'll address the questions in the order stated in the Notice. The first question is, is Mr. Beckwith contributing to the delinquency of a female minor, namely one az-Zahra. How do you answer, Mr. Beckwith?"

"Denied," said Beckwith calmly.

"Do you live in the same apartment with the aforesaid minor?" asked Smerll.

"Yes."

"Have you had sexual intercourse with her?"

"Objection," said Beckwith firmly, "on the grounds that an answer might tend to incriminate me."

"You don't have to do that, Sidi," said az-Zahra. She rose from the table, walked over to the credenza, and punched a set of numbers into the visi.

By golly, thought Beckwith, she memorized the number!

A weary face appeared on the monitor. "Marriage Bureau, may I help you?"

"We want to be married."

"I see you, lady, but where is *he?*"

"Right here," said Beckwith. He walked up beside her.

Smerll found his voice. "This is absolutely preposterous!"

They ignored him and duly proceeded with the ceremony, which, after the prescribed questions, answers, and payment, was duly registered in the Vital Statistics of the District of Columbia.

"In any case, Mr. Smerll," the new groom observed mildly, "you're really in no position to complain. Several of your allegations are based on the proposition that we are not married."

Smerll clenched his teeth. "If the circus is over, can we return to the legitimate business of this Hearing?"

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"Good idea," said az-Zahra. She and Beckwith went back to their chairs. She called over to the Ethics Director, "We demand dismissal of questions 1, 2, and 3, all dealing with Mr. Beckwith's alleged improper treatment of me as a minor. In view of our marriage, these questions must be considered moot."

"Oh, all right." He added grimly, "But be it noted, this stipulation has nothing to do with questions of illegal entry and deportation."

"You're quite wrong," said Beckwith. "Since she is now married to a U.S. citizen, illegal entry is no longer grounds for deportation."

"Marriage be damned!" cried Smerll. "She's crazy, Beckwith, and you know it. She claims she sailed on a magic carpet from Spain a thousand years ago and landed in Virginia last year. Lunacy is still grounds for deportation."

"Wrong again," replied Beckwith amiably. "In view of her marriage, her mental condition is no longer the concern of the Immigration Service. We should move on, Mr. Smerll."

"Okay, let it go for now. But how about Question 6, jewel smuggling?" He leered over the table toward az-Zahra. "Do you want to tell us how you got those things into the country?"

"I'll take that one," said Beckwith. "She has explained how they were sewn into the fabric of her traveling rug. She did not register them at a port of entry because she did not know there was even a country called the United States, or for that matter, a continent named North America. In 1236 such things were not known in Spain. Furthermore, the jewels are her personal property, in her lawful possession when she entered the country, and they all qualify as duty-free antiques under the two-hundred year rule. As I'm sure you're aware, if the artifact is at least two hundred years old, it's presumptively an antique, and duty-free. Not one was smuggled. Try something else, Mr. Smerll."

Smerll hesitated a moment, then laughed in harsh short bursts. "We always come back to that flight from Spain in 1236, don't we? The jewels weren't smuggled because they date back to 1236. The lady didn't enter illegally because the United States didn't exist when she left Spain. Well, if we believe that, we should be able to believe in flying carpets and movement in time. I for one am not so gullible." He picked up a document from the table in front of him. "This is a patent application, filed by Mrs. Beckwith in collusion with you, Mr. Beckwith. It describes a flying carpet, and firmly asserts, under penalty of perjury, that this carpet can carry a person backward or forward in time, and over great distances. A more flagrant example of fraud on the Patent Office is difficult to imagine." He smiled down at the newlyweds. "This is a crime, and it requires punishment."

Beckwith now stood up. He laid his hands on the canvas bag. "Mr. Smerll, since there seems to be considerable doubt as to the working of

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the rug, I should mention that we brought a sample. We can demonstrate operability right here."

"No sir, no indeed," said Smerll coldly. "You can fool the Patent Office, Beckwith, but you can't fool me."

"Of course not, Mr. Smerll," said az-Zahra. "We would never even try." She unzipped the bag and took the rug out. "This is the invention. It is a standard size Muslim prayer rug. It differs from an ordinary prayer rug only in that certain metal filaments and gemstones are woven into the fabric in a special pattern." She lifted the rug with both hands, carried it around to the head of the table, and spread it out on the floor near Smerll's chair. "Excellency, every one of your remaining queries turns on a question of fact: does the rug work? So let us make a deal. I will prepare the rug, and you will stand on it. I think you will disappear. If you disappear, all remaining questions are answered. If you do not disappear, Mr. Beckwith will resign from the bar forthwith, I will forfeit all my jewels to the Customs Service, and I will return to Spain."

She waited. The only sound in the room was Smerll's noisy breathing. His eyes darted, to her, to the rug, to Beckwith. And back to the rug.

Beckwith watched him. He knew what the man was thinking: She's bluffing. . . trying to get me to back off.

Finally Smerll nodded.

"Just a moment," said az-Zahra. "I have to turn with it seven times. And would you hold this, please, while I make the turnings." She handed Smerll a wooden stick wrapped in multicolored fabric. He looked at it dubiously. "A flag?"

Beckwith's lips formed the same words. Then he whispered, "Wha—?" He started to rise, but she looked at him, and he sat down again, mesmerized.

She picked the rug up, wrapped it around her body, turned seven times, then laid it on the floor once more. "Now, your eminence, it is ready. You may stand on it, if you like. Hold the flag up, please. That's fine."

Beckwith noted that the two great rubies were blinking up at them from the fabric. Could he really let Smerll do this? He leaped to his feet. "Irwin! *No!*"

But it was too late.

Smerll stepped on the rug. And faded. And vanished.

For a long moment Beckwith stared at the empty rug. Then back at az-Zahra. She lifted her eyebrows slightly. "He was determined to do it," she said. She didn't sound at all defensive.

Homicide? suicide? Beckwith wondered. He groaned softly. "*Where?*" he whispered.

"Call it," she replied cheerfully, "a glorious journey. Is the hearing over?"

"I guess. But—"

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She took a step closer. "In your culture, aren't you supposed to kiss the bride?"

He did. A good long one. "But—*Smerll?* What—?"

She interrupted him. "Hadn't you better be getting back to the office? And I have to get home and start organizing our wedding reception."

"Yeah." He was totally bemused. "Yeah." (Smerll? *Where are you!*)

14. A Historic Moment

They retraced their steps toward the reception room and the elevators without incident. The cluster around the holo set had tripled during the hour. Beckwith started to pull her around toward the exit.

"Wait," she whispered. "Listen!"

The voice came over the heads of the little audience: "Cass Jones, International News. What we see here is a file shot of the northern lip of Gorbachev Crater. That little area here—indicated by an 'X' on your holo screen, an area we call 'Flag Corners'—is where the *Gagarin* shuttle will land. One moment, please, Captain Petrov is coming on. We hear the captain's voice from the *Gagarin* landing shuttle. He's obviously delighted. He has just given the order for retrofire. Going down, now. We sense the physical descent of the little craft. Ah! He's down. The captain is speaking again. We translate. 'Russia has landed. A historic moment for Russia and for the world. Our flag is ready and waiting. While I suit up, we will run the nose visi up a few meters and make a panoramic sweep of the flag area.'

"And so, ladies and gentlemen, while the good captain suits up, we'll take a moment to check on the other ships in the race. We note that the *John F. Kennedy* is coming up fast, but it is at least ten hours out from Ganymede." (And there, thought the lawyer, goes the Space Agency account and D. Beckwith, P.C.) "Farther back," continued the voice, "number three in this great contest is the German ship, *Deutschland,* followed by the Spanish *Toreador,* and the French *Napoleon.*"

"Let's go," Beckwith said softly.

"Not yet."

The newscast continued. "And now, ladies and gentlemen, back to Captain Petrov. He's still slowly panning the area, 'Flag Corners,' of what will soon be a new Russian province. The site is well chosen. We see no rocks or rubble larger than a soccer ball. What? One moment, ladies and gentlemen. Petrov says . . . *what?* My, my, our translator says Captain Petrov is shouting a string of Russian curses. Did we miss something? Run it back. . . . Yes, there at the edge. Well, look at that, ladies and gentlemen, what we are looking at is a man holding an American flag! How can this be? Are we there first, after all?"

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"Huh?" grunted the lawyer. He shouldered his way through the watchers for a good look at the holo screen. And then he stopped breathing for several seconds.

The announcer hesitated. "We seem to have lost our picture. We suspect that Captain Petrov has turned off his camera. Has this moment of victory suddenly turned to ashes? We simply don't know. What? Oh. We've just been told a U.N. patrol corvette is moving in to investigate. Yes, the *Ralph Bunche*. So what's going on? Well, to sum up, for those of you who joined us late, Captain Petrov of the R.S. *Gagarin* has just landed his shuttle on Ganymede, and he was personally welcomed by a flag-holding American.

"Meanwhile, we'll run the tail-end of that tape once more. There he is, the man with Old Glory. Not waving, of course. The fabric is obviously frozen stiff. And since our American is not wearing a space suit or protection of any kind, we have to assume that he is likewise frozen. We see dark splotches around his ears and nose and mouth. We take that to be blood, which froze instantly, a result of the near-zero atmospheric temperature and pressure on the Jovian satellite. At present we have absolutely no explanation of how he got there."

Pale and shaken, Beckwith worked his way back to az-Zahra, and this time steered her unresisting to the door. For you, he thought, was Smerll that banner-waving barbarian on the siegetower? And now, is it all finally finished? Sleep, blessed Cordoba!

She looked up at him with clear serene eyes. "Okay?"

And he replied, "Allah akbar!" ●

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ON BOOKS

Norman Spinrad

MARS

RED MARS
Kim Stanley Robinson
Bantam Spectra, $22.95 (hardcover), $11.95 (paperback)
GREEN MARS
Kim Stanley Robinson
Bantam Spectra, $22.95 (hardcover), $12.95 (paperback)
BLUE MARS
Kim Stanley Robinson
Bantam Spectra, $22.95 (hardcover)

Mars. The very name rings with a peculiar science fictional magic, does it not? Mars. Edgar Rice Burroughs and John Carter. Mars. H.G. Wells and *The War of the Worlds*. Mars. Ray Bradbury and *The Martian Chronicles*. Mars. Stanley Weinbaum and "A Martian Odyssey." Mars. C.S. Lewis and *Out of the Silent Planet*. Mars. Robert A. Heinlein and *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Mars. Philip K. Dick and *The Martian Time Slip* and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*.

And so on and so forth ad infinitum.

Surely no celestial body has been the setting for as many science fiction tales as the Red Planet, and indeed it wouldn't be stretching things all that far to say including the Earth, a planet that in any event has been fictionally invaded by more Martians than any other imperialist alien nationality.

Further, Mars has been the setting for literally just about every sort of science fiction imaginable, from the Barsoomian thud and blunder of Edgar Rice Burroughs to the poetic fantasies of Ray Bradbury, from the hard SF of Ben Bova's *Mars* to the psychedelic mysticism of *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and Ian Watson's *The Martian Inca* to the political satire of Terry Bisson's *Voyage to the Red Planet*.

Mars has a mythic resonance not only for habitual science fiction readers but in the general zeitgeist itself. Martians have arguably become a modern archetype in the Jungian collective unconscious. "The Man from Mars" was a generally recognized metaphor for the naïf with a peculiar viewpoint long before Heinlein corporated it in the fictional flesh of Michael Valentine Smith.

So why Mars?

Why not Venus, a more brilliant object in the night sky? Why not mighty Jupiter or ringed Saturn? Why not the Moon?

Indeed, prior to the age of the

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telescope, at least in the Occident, Mars, the sigil planet of the god of war thanks to its sanguinary color, did play second fiddle to Jupiter, sigil of the king of the gods, and, depending upon your philosophical point of view, arguably ranked behind Venus, sigil planet of the goddess of love.

But the invention of the telescope changed all that. Through the telescope, red Mars displayed white polar ice caps that grew and shrank, and greenish patches that waxed and waned with the seasons like vegetation.

In the nineteenth century, Giovanni Schiaparelli, an Italian astronomer peering through his telescope, made out a vague network of markings that might have been the great dry canyons we know today or might have been instrumental artifacts, and reported seeing "channels." But the language he wrote in was Italian, in which the word for "channels" is "canali," lazily mistranslated into English by substituting the English pluralizer "s" for the Italian "i."

And so were born the fabulous Canals of Mars.

The telescopes of the nineteenth century produced less than razor-sharp images, and so the image of Mars seen through even the best of them was fuzzy enough for vaguely seen features to be subject to romantic interpretation. The red "deserts" were certainly clearly visible, as were the ice caps and the waxing and waning green spots, and so it was easy for imaginative projection to convince other astronomers that they were seeing the canals and cause them to confirm Schiaparelli's sightings.

Foremost among them perhaps was the reputable American astronomer Percival Lowell, who, near the turn of the twentieth century, published a book in which he assembled the currently available data into a picture of the planet that would dominate science fiction for over half a century, all the way from Burroughs through Bradbury and beyond until overthrown by the Mariner fly-by probes in 1965.

Mars was a cold dry desert of a world. Most of what water there was was tied up in the polar caps. And yet . . .

And yet there were those patches of green that seemed to grow with the Martian summer and shrink with the Martian winter. A natural phenomenon? Were those canali dry arroyos that filled with ice-cap runoff in the Martian summer, bringing water to natural oases of life?

Or were they indeed canals, constructed by an old and perhaps dying Martian civilization in a noble and perhaps ultimately tragic attempt to survive the desiccation of the planet?

Well, if you're a scientist, such a question is arguable, but if you're a science fiction writer in search of thematically and poetically resonant material, the literary choice of interpretation is, of course, obvious.

Particularly so since Mars was the closest planetary body to the Earth save the Moon (understood

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by the turn of the twentieth century to be airless and dead), as well as the most similar. Which is to say not only the most likely planetary abode of extraterrestrial life in our solar system, but also the most technologically accessible.

And while he may not have been the first science fiction writer to set fictional adventures on Mars or even the first to use the canals, surely it was Edgar Rice Burroughs who launched a thousand fictional spaceships in the direction of the Red Planet with the long, long Barsoom cycle, which began with *A Princess of Mars*, first published in 1912 long before the SF genre in the Gernsbackian sense even existed, which continued into the 1940s, and which spawned a host of imitations and knock-offs, conscious and otherwise.

And whether conscious or otherwise, Burroughs' Mars, aka Barsoom, more or less vaguely followed the general planetological picture popularized by Lowell, which, romanticized, fantasized, and mythologized, had long since passed into the popular zeitgeist by the time he began the cycle, and which had long since become a staple consensus setting for a certain species of science fiction before he was finished.

A dying desert planet crisscrossed by canals built by more or less ancient and more or less decadent Martians, exotic cities, strange cults, intrigue, sword fights, sexual overtones that perhaps had best not see the full wan light of day.

Perhaps the epitome of this popular school was the work of Leigh Brackett, who wrote a long series of works set on this sort of Mars that began in 1940 and continued into the dawn of the Bradbury era.

Pardon my innocent ignorance, but am I the first to ponder the connection between this science fictional vision of Mars as pseudo-oriental exotica and the popular vision of late classical Egypt?

A bleak desert land with life and civilization clinging to the banks of the waterways. An ancient and decadent race whose history had seen far greater glories living among tombs and monuments and forgotten mysteries. Curses and musty spells and long-lost forbidden knowledge. Where the Western man or the Earthman is somehow at once beyond his mystical depth and intellectually and technologically superior to the natives.

Be that as it may, it is certainly true that the period between, say, Edgar Rice Burroughs' *A Princess of Mars* and Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, which is to say roughly the period between the turn of the twentieth century and the dawn of the post-World War II world, was an epoch when just such a political and cultural relationship between the technologically, economically, militarily, and politically superior powers of the younger Occident and the older civilizations of what would later be called the Third World was pretty much taken for granted by the literary explorers and exploiters thereof in the popular exotic adventure genre.

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And in literary terms much of the Martian science fiction of this half century could be taken as a transposition of the nineteenth-century exotic adventure tale set in dark Africa or East of Suez or far-off India, wherein the Briton or the Frenchman or the American or the Earthman must survive the hardships of an alien clime, learn the secrets and gain the confidences of the older and mystically wiser but ultimately technologically and morally inferior cultures he encounters, and in the end, perhaps, bring true civilization to these lesser breeds beyond the law.

How different, really, is John Carter from Clive of India or Barsoom from the lost cities Tarzan himself encounters in the hidden depths of the African jungle?

By the turn of the twentieth century, after all, the Occident had pretty much made itself political, technological, and hence economic and military overlord of the planet, and the chances of encountering a new unknown and exotic ancient civilization on the surface of the Earth were slim and none.

So where else to take the old colonial exotic adventure roadshow but where Lowell suggested the same might just be found, namely Mars?

World War II, of course, changed many things, and Hiroshima and the atom aside, perhaps the most drastic change was the breakup of the European empires in what then came to be called the Third World, though it could not exactly be said that they went gentle into that good night.

With the colonial empires vanished the colonialist literary assumptions.

Well, perhaps not entirely.

But now at least the old relationship between the younger, technologically, economically, and militarily superior West and the older tradition-based civilizations of the Third World could no longer be taken as an unexamined given.

Nor could fictional transpositions of the same to the surface of Mars remain naively unconscious of the subtleties, ironies, and moral ambiguities thereof.

Oh, to be sure, such things continued to be written, indeed continue to be written up until the present day, but after *The Martian Chronicles,* they could only be either Burroughs pastiches in the manner of Lin Carter or deliberately elegiac and nostalgic postmodern post-realist space opera in the manner of Colin Greenland.

Is it coincidence that Ray Bradbury wrote the stories in *The Martian Chronicles* (published in 1950) during the 1940s, the very era when the colonial empires were beginning to break up, and the relationship between Western technological civilization and the older traditional cultures elsewhere was being called into serious question?

I think not. I have no idea whether the young Bradbury was giving any conscious thought to such matters at the time, but no one really writes in a cultural vacuum, least of all the science fiction

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writer, who cannot, and indeed should not, keep from being influenced by events in his own cultural surround when he imagines and creates events in a fictional future.

Phenomenologically speaking, Bradbury's Mars was pretty much the old consensus model. It's all there; the deserts and the canals, the ruins and the ancient Martians. But literarily speaking, Bradbury's Mars was radically different.

The Martian Chronicles was more or less published as a novel and most people who have heard of it (or seen the TV series), but not read it, probably think of it as such, and even many of us who read it as wide-eyed teenagers (such as myself), but not since, may nostalgically remember it that way.

But the book is a collection of short stories and not a novel. And while this sort of thing was quite common at the time and became if anything more common later, most so-called "fix-up" novels, that is, short stories collected from magazines and published as a novel in book form, were cycles of stories featuring, at minimum, the same central character in the same consistent setting.

The stories in *The Martian Chronicles,* however, share only the Martian setting, and, consistency being the hobgoblin of little minds and Bradbury's being emphatically otherwise, he is not herein self-hobbled by sticking to an entirely consistent Martian setting either.

And while Bradbury's Mars may be the old consensus model in a physical and even cultural sense—the ancient planet, the canals, the ruins, the dying or sometimes even dead Martian civilization, the atmosphere depicted as conveniently breathable for fictional purposes—what he did with it was drastically and wonderfully different.

No thud and blunder or Earthman's Burden here! None of the stories in *The Martian Chronicles* could remotely be described as running along "action-adventure plotlines."

The mood is nostalgic, wistful, frequently even pastoral, and while the Earthmen are generally depicted as rather thick blunderers in the presence of a finer and more keenly esthetic Martian zeitgeist, there are really no villains and no heroes.

Bradbury's Mars is not only the fictional setting for the transmogrification of the old Earthmen versus Martian conflict into a series of meditations upon the deeper and more complexly ambiguous truths of such cultural confrontation, but a grand metaphorical construct that in the end stands for the conflict between Bradbury's jaundiced vision of humanity's despiritualized and demythologized modernity and what he sees through the rosy lens of nostalgia's granny glasses as the deeper and more authentic values of our timeless and eternal soul.

And while it could hardly be said that the old pre-Bradbury Martian adventure science fiction made

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any serious pass at scientific accuracy when it got in the way of a good sword fight, in *The Martian Chronicles*, Bradbury is forthrightly writing not science fiction at all but fantasy set on Mars, fantasy that knows it's fantasy, and not only doesn't give a damn, but glories in it.

And here we have, probably for the first time, a science fiction writer, or at least a writer who became known as a science fiction writer, who was a genuine prose stylist, and a powerful one; unafraid of emotional colorations of subtlety and tenderness previous unknown to the genre, unafraid of nostalgic wistfulness of mood, a certain hint of schmaltz even, capable of flights of poetry, indeed, one might argue in retrospect, occasionally to somewhat purple-tinged excess.

In short, Bradbury took the old romantic Martian adventure tale, threw away the adventure, kept the romance, and turned it into literature.

A Martian literature peculiarly Bradbury's own, and an impossible vector for other writers to follow except with pastiche or parody, intentional or otherwise. And so while *The Martian Chronicles* made it impossible for subsequent Martian adventure tales to be taken as anything but ersatz period pieces, it really spawned no new school of Martian romance either.

For the next decade and more, Mars for the most part either served as an incidental venue or piece of business for science fiction whose central concerns were elsewhere such as *Stranger in a Strange Land* or *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, or was the venue of earnest hard science fiction tales of the rigors of planetary colonization like Arthur C. Clarke's *The Sands of Mars*, or Heinlein's juvenile *Red Planet*.

And in 1965, the first photos of the Martian surface sent back by the Mariner IV probe revealed not canals and vegetation but a dead and cratered landscape far more reminiscent of the Moon than anything in Burroughs or Bradbury, which would seem to have put an end to even the hard SF tale of the arduous colonization of the Red Planet as a scientifically or literarily credible fictional staple.

Right?

Wrong.

Very, and very interestingly wrong.

Because in the 1970s the far more sophisticated Viking orbiters photographed the whole planet and revealed that the 1960s image of Mars as a cratered clone of the Moon was no more accurate than Lowell's nineteenth-century canals and vegetation.

Yet another new picture of Mars began to emerge. A cold world with a thin unbreathable atmosphere to be sure, but a planet whose great dry river beds indicated that water must have flowed in the past and might still be there today locked up in permafrost beneath the surface. With oxygen locked up in the iron oxide sands. . . .

A world which was probably dead

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now, but which might have been the abode of life in the past during a wetter and warmer Martian age.

And even if it had never been, why could it not be transformed into a livable habitat by technology not fantastically more advanced than the current state of our art. . . ?

In an old science fictional word, by terraforming.

If the real Mars is not the planet of our hearts' desires, why can we not, in the immortal words of SF's very own Captain Picard, wave the magic wand of our technology and "make it so"?

In terms of speculative credibility, at least.

And so, strangely and bravely and wonderfully enough, the last decade or so has seen an unexpected renaissance of the Martian novel; neither the Barsoomian novel of science fantasy nor the Bradburyian school of Martian magic surrealism, but in the form of the more or less scientifically credible tale of Martian terraforming.

To list a random sample: Frederik Pohl's *Man Plus*. Ben Bova's *Mars*. Kevin J. Anderson's *Climbing Mount Olympus*. S.C. Sykes' *Red Genesis*. Greg Bear's *Moving Mars*. Lewis Shiner's *Frontera*. Paul J. McAuley's *Red Dust*. Ian MacDonald's *Desolation Road*. John E. Stith's *Death Tolls*.

Literarily speaking, these are very different sorts of novels; hard science fiction, libertarian political science fiction, realistic psychological fiction, neo-Bradburyian romanticism, and so forth.

But what they all have in common is that they start with the acceptance of the best current scientific picture of Mars and then, with varying degrees of scientific credibility and verisimilitude, terraform the planet into a setting that suits their literary purposes.

Even the least discerning reader will no doubt notice that I have thus far failed to mention the most significant post-Bradbury Martian novels of all, namely Kim Stanley Robinson's massive trilogy *Red Mars, Green Mars,* and *Blue Mars,* surely the capstone of this whole literary vector.

If one had to summarize the history of Martian science fiction with the names of three writers, they would surely be Edgar Rice Burroughs, Ray Bradbury, and Kim Stanley Robinson.

Burroughs set the template for a half-century of Martian SF adventure fiction by turning Lowell's misguided scientific speculation into Barsoom.

Bradbury shattered that tradition by transmogrifying that consensus image of Mars into his own literally inimitable grand metaphor.

And now, just as images and exploration of the real thing would seem to have quite thoroughly destroyed the scientific verisimilitude or even speculative possibility of nearly a century's worth of the Mars of science fiction's heart's desire, Robinson has restored the literary credibility of a baroque and romantic Mars.

And paradoxically enough, via the very scientific instrumentalities that would seem to have destroyed

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it, namely by writing the definitive epic of Martian terraforming.

Science fiction doesn't get any harder than this. How can it? *Red Mars* opens the trilogy with the planet as Robinson's best current scientific information finds it, and by the time *Blue Mars* ends about 1500 pages later, we have a rich and wondrous and watery Mars replete with a breathable atmosphere and a profusion of complex ecosystems and human cultures.

And Robinson describes this stepwise transformation with a technological credibility that Arthur C. Clarke, or for that matter Carl Sagan, could only envy. The amount of research he had to do must have been prodigious. He knows the geology and terrain of the real Mars so thoroughly and describes it with such authority that it's often hard to remember that he couldn't possibly have really been there. The methods by which a dead Mars is terraformed and quickened to life are incremental and many, and Robinson makes each and every one of them credible in copious detail.

Indeed, all this is done so thoroughly and exhaustively that, particularly in the concluding volume, *Blue Mars,* this virtue transforms itself into a flaw of excess as Robinson, via the endless wanderings of his cast of characters, seems to be describing every rock, every clump of moss, every iota of climatological change.

At first take, Kim Stanley Robinson seems like an odd writer to have written this Mars trilogy, having never really written anything that could be called hard science fiction before.

Or so it would seem.

Prior to the Mars trilogy his best known and best work was the Orange County trilogy: *The Wild Shore, The Gold Coast,* and *Pacific Edge,* three very different novels, thematically, stylistically, and speculatively, set in three alternate future Southern Californias—reduced to a kind of wilderness preserve after a lost war, a booming metropolitan sprawl thanks to the drug and armaments industry, a gentle green ecotopia.

Nothing in common with the hard science fiction of the Mars trilogy to come.

And yet . . .

And yet in the Orange County trilogy Robinson displays both a deep connection to and literary use of landscape quite rare if not unique in the SF genre. Robinson's descriptions of the wild lands remaining in varying degrees in each of the three books of the Orange County trilogy are not merely vivid and accurate but emotional and spiritual. He uses the land and his characters' emotional and spiritual relationship with it as a means of elucidating their psyches. Many of these characters love this land with an informed love, and so one feels, does the author.

And while the Mars trilogy is hard science fiction by even the most rigorous definition, these three books are also very much novels of landscape.

How can they not be?

The cast of characters is reason-

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ably large, and, thanks to the invention of a life-extension technique, most of the main ones are around for the whole two-hundred-odd-year time-span from the beginning of *Red Mars* to the conclusion of *Blue Mars*. But another flaw of the overall work, if that is what it is, is that there is no overall dramatic skeleton, no central human story.

Well, maybe one.

The personal, scientific, philosophical, political, and spiritual conflict—or, better perhaps, dialectic—between Sax Russell, the arch terraformer, and Ann Clayborne, arch advocate of keeping Mars in its pristine natural state, continues throughout the three novels.

If there is a central theme to the trilogy expressed by dramatic conflict, which is to say, an actual story, this is it, and it is certainly about the landscape.

Indeed, it would not be pushing things all that far to say that it is a love triangle story, with the landscape itself as the love object of contention.

Sax loves the landscape he and his cohorts are creating; the light dusting of lichen they manage to introduce, the oxygen they begin to release into the atmosphere by diverse means, the first adapted arctic fauna and higher flora, each increment of increase in the barometric pressure, the ice lakes, the beginnings of streams, rivers, the birth of an ocean, the moment when humans begin to walk on the surface without breathing equipment. . . .

This is science and technology as an art, as a thing of the spirit, the noble bringing of life to what was a dead world, and via Sax Russell, Robinson renders this sympathetically, touchingly, with warmth and affection, but not without irony and humor.

Ann Clayborne, on the other hand, hates all this. She is a geologist and a prime advocate of the "Red Mars" cause, of those who believe that the planet should be left as humanity found it—sere, dry, cold, with an unbreathable atmosphere, and the original barometric pressure that will constrain humans to wear "Mars suits" forever.

This point of view, at least to me, seems perversely thanatotic, making its advocacy by a large segment of the colonial population credible a difficult task indeed, and rendering a fanatic like Ann sympathetic almost impossible.

Yet while I doubt that many readers would enlist in her cause, Robinson does manage to make Ann's emotional commitment to it credible, and, by extension, that of the "Reds."

He does this by getting inside her head and rendering her strange love of the original sterile, bare, pristine Martian landscape believable, indeed almost sympathetic.

To do this, it would seem that Robinson has to be able to love the original (the currently real) Martian landscape himself, and indeed it would be hard to see how he could have endured going to such apparently enormous lengths to at-

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tain a lover's familiarity with it if he did not.

And indeed, Robinson's next novel is about Antarctica, and he has spent time in the high Himalayas, so perhaps, even though his ultimate sympathies seem to be with Sax and the terraformers, it is not assuming too much to suppose that his esthetic appreciation of cold and all but lifeless wilderness is genuine.

It is this emotional connection to the landscape—Ann's to the original, Sax's to the result of the terraformers' art, the author's to both—which renders the excessive description of the geology, areology, ecology, and so forth less than stupefying.

There is still far too much of it for my taste, but because it is almost always shown through the eyes and consciousness of characters with an emotional connection to the land, it at least is more than an endless progression of gigantic expository lumps, which is not to say that a blue pencil job of some ruthlessness would not have improved all three novels, and *Blue Mars* in particular.

And even then the Mars trilogy wouldn't have really held up very well as simply a series of long hard science fiction novels of terraforming without the political dimension that, like the dialectic between Sax and Ann, serves as another substitute for a true dramatic structure at the heart of the entire work.

Like the Orange County trilogy, the Mars books are also a work of political science fiction, but quite unlike the Orange County books, which presented three alternate political possibilities and were entirely free-standing, the Mars trilogy follows a single political story line and at least in that aspect is structurally not really a trilogy at all but one truly humongous novel cut up into three gigantic though publishable slices.

On a superficial level, this aspect of the work is the story of colonial Mars fighting to attain and then maintain its independence from Earth, an oft-told libertarian tale, the template for which is perhaps Robert A. Heinlein's *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*. But the Earthly powers oppressing Mars here are not the regulatory bureaucratic minions of national states but predatory transnational corporations, and the society the Martians struggle to establish is not one that the shades of either Heinlein or Ayn Rand would find pleasing.

Dare I say it?

Robinson doesn't quite, but, what the hell, I do.

The demi-utopian society that the Martians evolve is more or less a hybrid of socialism and syndicalist anarchism.

Red Mars ends with a botched revolution and the beginning of a long underground struggle, which, by the end of *Green Mars*, wins a precarious independence, and *Blue Mars*, at least in these terms, is, interestingly enough for this sort of thing, the story of the Martians' struggle to maintain this independence.

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What the Martians are struggling against throughout this whole long work is not the statist political colonialism that plays the villain in the usual libertarian version of this sort of thing, but quite the contrary, the economic imperialism of just the sort of Darwinian free marketeers that play the libertarian heroes. Namely the transnational corporations who even today are hollowing out the power of sovereign states and which by the time of *Red Mars* have completed the process to the point where the United Nations itself does not only their bidding but their dirty work.

The libertarianism that informs works like Heinlein's *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress,* Greg Bear's *Moving Mars,* and any number of SF tales in which the libertarian anarchists of the Asteroids win their freedom from wicked old Earth, is, not to put too fine a line on it, anarchism of the right.

The government, its regulations, its bureaucracy, the state itself, is the villain, and humanity would be better off getting rid of it and allowing the enlightened self-interest of entrepreneurship, and the evolutionary pressure of market forces to, in effect, run the show.

But the anarchism of Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy is a form of syndicalist anarchism, an anarchism of the left. Here too statist structures are viewed with suspicion, but market forces and corporate capitalism even more so. For left to their own mindless devices, market forces operate according to the lex talonis, in which the big ones eat the little ones, until what is left is a society in the control of giant corporations responsible to no one and nothing but the mathematical imperative of the sacred bottom line.

It is these conglomerated corporate behemoths that the Martians must struggle against, not the national states that indeed are in the advanced process of withering away, albeit in a manner that would have Karl Marx spinning in his grave.

On an action level, this becomes pretty much the usual science fiction story of rebellion against the existing power structure, but along about the middle of *Green Mars,* it begins to metaphorphose into a confrontation with politically, economically, and philosophically more interesting and difficult questions.

Namely, if you don't want a strong nation-state to run things, and you don't want corporate capitalism to run rampant, how do you prevent the latter without the regulatory force of the former?

The answer that Robinson's Martians develop over three long volumes arises out of the nature of the underground societies they evolve long before their successful second revolution.

As Bob Dylan observed, "You've got to be honest to live outside the law," which perforce must be the principle upon which any underground group must operate if it is to survive. You can't own stock in a revolutionary movement without

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rolling up your sleeves and sharing in the work.

In other words, each underground group, and particularly in a situation like Robinson's Mars where there are thousands of them, geographically isolated and amateurs of all sorts of arcane ideologies, must function as a syndicate, something like a kibbutz, in which those who do the work (and no others) own the enterprise and make decisions, or at least choose those who do, in some sort of democratic manner.

Transpose this to overground economic enterprises, and you have syndicalism, in which the workers (and no others) own the enterprise in question and run the show within the exterior constraints of market forces. Call it socialism in that the workers own all the means of production, or call it non-corporate capitalism, in that all stockholders must contribute their labor to the corporation in question, whichever turns you on.

In the absence of a state, this is indeed syndicalist anarchism, in which these entirely independent syndicalist entities must evolve a society that works via negotiation and mutual self-interest alone.

But in the absence of a state, who or what keeps the big ones from eating the little ones? Who or what keeps corporate capitalism from evolving all over again? Who or what even enforces contracts among the syndicates?

Who or what indeed?

In the end, only a population of saints could make pur sang syndicalist anarchism work, and so even the diverse anarchistic syndicalist organizations of Mars must create a government of sorts, at bare minimum a constitutional framework, a legislative means to create and modify a legal code within it, a judiciary to rule on putative violations thereof, and some sort of executive authority to enforce the law and deal with the predatory forces of corporate Earth.

A minimalist government, to be sure, but one whose powers over the quasi-independent syndicates are held in check not so much by libertarian minimalism but by a profusion of different power centers, a detailed and complex constitution, a decision-making procedure that requires consensus in the Japanese spirit rather than majoritarianism.

Which is why I call what the Martians evolve after endless debate and machinations a hybrid of syndicalist anarchism and socialism. You can't play a proper game of baseball without an umpire, and paradoxically enough, you can't have a syndicalist anarchistic society without at least enough government to enforce the rules of syndicalist anarchism.

If all of the above seems like a long-winded didactic political lecture, well multiply it by about two hundred, and you will get an idea of how much wordage Robinson devotes to this sort of thing in these three novels.

Again, some ruthless editing would have been all to the good. Robinson develops his political ar-

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guments quite cogently and well enough through the personas and schemes of various characters in political conflict to keep it all from becoming really brain-numbing, but in the absence of an overarching dramatic structure in which it all might be integrated, the effect, even for a political theory junkie like me, becomes a bit much.

If you feel that this discussion of the Mars trilogy has scanted somewhat on character relations and story line, well, what can I say, so has the author.

For purposes of continuity, Robinson postulates a life-extension technology that allows many of the Original Hundred—the first colonists—and their immediate descendants to live throughout the whole three books.

And here, by the way, we have a major scientific flaw in an otherwise meticulously realistic speculative extrapolation of the terraforming of Mars, or more likely a deliberate fudge for literary purposes. That technology can extend the human life span into a second century is quite credible, but that the terraforming of Mars, down to the creation of a breathable atmosphere and an ocean, can be accomplished in less than a millennium goes against a considerable body of scientific work. Giving his characters the requisite millennial lifespans instead would have been more scientifically credible, though admittedly not by much, but probably more literarily difficult to handle.

Scientific flaw or deliberate creative fudge, the life-extension technology combined with the compression of terraforming time does allow Robinson to use the Original Hundred to give the trilogy the only personal continuity it has, indeed perhaps the only personal continuity that such a work can have.

Continuity, yes, but a continuous story, not really.

There are love stories among the cast of characters, political and philosophical conflicts, but aside from the dialectic between Ann Clayborne and Sax Russell, these are all subplots, none of which really even last a whole single volume. And even the relationship between Ann and Sax only emerges as the thematic core around the middle of the final novel, *Blue Mars*.

One can take this as a flaw in the novels or one can take it as another deliberate creative choice on the part of the author, and only Kim Stanley Robinson really knows which it is, if indeed, even he does.

Taken as a flaw, it gives the trilogy a certain formlessness of structure, a certain lack of dramatic coherence, a certain emotional distance between the reader and the doings (mainly peregrinations) of the various characters.

Taken as a deliberate creative choice, it makes the planet Mars itself the central character of the whole grand tale.

Only Mars is present in each and every scene, save relatively short sections that take place on Earth and in a spaceship. It is Mars over whose destiny and nature the various subsidiary charac-

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ters contend. It is Mars who is the beloved. It is Mars who evolves under pressure throughout the three novels, Mars whose ultimate destiny is in doubt, Mars who emerges as the triumphant hero at the end. And even in the story of Sax and Ann, it is Mars who is central.

It might not really be stretching this metaphor too far to say that the trilogy is a kind of bildungsroman with Mars as the young (but also ancient) pilgrim on the evolutionary road to eventual maturity.

And thus this so-called trilogy becomes one immense novel, not set on Mars, but about Mars, in a way that no other novel ever has been.

The ultimate Mars novel, perhaps, for it is hard to imagine anyone ever writing anything quite like it again, or even wanting to.

And yet . . .

And yet about the very time that the final volume, *Blue Mars*, was published, NASA announced that evidence of ancient Martian life had been discovered in a meteorite kicked loose from the Red Planet and found in Antarctica. And virtually as I write this, British scientists have discovered similar traces in a much younger Mars rock.

It would now appear that the chances that Mars once had life are, very conservatively speaking, better than even. And when you consider the ambiguous results of the Viking lander's search for chemical signatures of metabolic activity in the Martian soil experiment in the light of this new evidence, I'd bet even money that life is still there today.

Can it be?

It would seem possible.

There may indeed in the end be stranger things in heaven and Mars than are dreamt of in even Kim Stanley Robinson's Martian philosophies. ●

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NEXT ISSUE

JULY COVER STORY

New writer **R. Neube** spins the fast-paced, funny, and action-packed story of a professional wrestler who must face his greatest challenge in an arena far from this Earth, in a match with the fate of millions at stake, and in a story that re-defines our definitions of diplomacy, as he gives us ringside seats for the epic conflict of "The Holy Stomper Vs. the Alien Barrel of Death."

JULY LEAD STORY

The gonzo **Eliot Fintushel** also returns in July, with a story that is wild and woolly even by his standards, as the intrepid Izzy, the balding Transdimensional Cosmic Nexus and part-time motel manager, last seen here in last year's "Izzy at the Lucky Three," is forced to battle a conspiracy so insidious and vast and all-embracing that it spreads out over all of time and space and to other continuums as well, in a dazzlingly pyrotechnic, outrageously inventive, and very funny new novella called "Izzy and the Father of Terror." We'll be very surprised if this isn't the flat-out weirdest story you'll read this year—and one of the most extravagantly entertaining, as well.

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World Fantasy Award-winner **Tanith Lee** takes us back to the Medieval World, where marauding dragons darkened the skies while peasants cowered helplessly in their villages below, for an unusual kind of love story that begins "After I Killed Her"; **Tony Daniel**, whose story "Life on the Moon" was on last year's Hugo ballot, returns with a bittersweet tale of romance, mystery, discovery, and loss, in "Black Canoes"; new writer **John C. Wright** returns with a look at how etiquette can be a matter of life or death when two ships meet each other in interstellar space, in the ingenious "Guest Law"; and **William Sanders**, a popular mystery novelist under another name, returns with a wry, colorful, and scary look at just how bad things can get if the "Words and Music" are wrong.

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column takes a look at "My New Software"; and **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Analog's Stan Schmidt, then the Memorial Day crunch. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 13107B Autumn Wood Way, Fairfax VA 22033. The hot line is (703) 449-1276. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a musical keyboard. — Erwin S. Strauss

APRIL 1997

25-27—**Camp Dover Peace Conference.** For info, write: **c/o Joe Manning, 105 Charles Dr., Dover OH 44622.** Or phone: **(216) 343-2545** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Dover OH (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: none announced. Star Trek convention. About 400 expected.

MAY 1997

2-4—**Magic Carpet Con. (800) 367-6224.** Days Inn M. Smith Rd., Chattanooga TN. M. Z. Bradley, the Dietricks.

2-4—**DemiCon. (515) 224-7654.** Howard Johnson's, Des Moines IA. B. Hambly, M. D. Bently, R. Hevelin, C. Piehl.

2-4—**Wolf 359—The Mission.** Norbeck Castle, Blackpool, England. R. D. McNeill, R. Herd. A media convention.

9-11—**MarCon, Box 141414, Columbus OH 43214. (614) 475-8181 or (614) 451-3154.** Hyatt. Harry Turtledove, Brom.

9-11—**FederationCon, c/o Schomann, Schopplerstr. 24, Augsburg D-86154, Germany.** Maritim, Bonn. Star Trek.

16-18—**ConVersion, Box 257795, Chicago IL 60625.** Hyatt, Deerfield IL. Pollotta, Waller. Comics/gaming stress.

16-18—**Oasis, Box 940992, Maitland FL 32794. (407) 263-5822.** Harley, Orlando FL. S. Schmidt, Walotsky, Bova.

16-18—**ConDuit, Box 11745, Salt Lake City UT 84147. (801) 273-0443.** Quality City Center. T. Zahn, S. Jackson.

16-18—**LepreCon, Box 26665, Tempe AZ 85285. (800) 237-4238.** Casa Grande AZ. Wolverton, Ward, D'Allesandro.

16-18—**KeyCon, Box 3178, Winnipeg MB R3C 4E7.** Crown Plaza Downtown. K. Anderson, M. Weis, R. Thompson.

23-25—**ConQuest, Box 36212, Kansas City MO 64171.** Park Place Hotel. Larry Niven, Alan Clark, Bob Stoltman.

23-25—**ConTroll, Box 740969, Houston TX 77274. (713) 895-9202.** Nothing more on this convention at press time.

23-25—**MisCon, Box 9363, Missoula MT 59807. (406) 543-5058.** Village Red Lion. Briggs, Brockschmidt, Jackson.

23-25—**RocKon, Box 24285, Little Rock AR 72212. (501) 224-8771 or (501) 776-1146.** D. Weber, D. Means

23-25—**VCon, Box 74664, Vancouver BC V6K 4P4.** Steven Brust.

23-26—**BayCon, Box 610427, San Jose CA 95161. (415) 450-1788.** Red Lion. J. Chalker, B. Eggleton, the Nicolais.

23-26—**Costume Con, 7806 Hanover Pkwy. t2, Greenbelt Md 20770. (301) 474-8616.** Lord Baltimore, Baltimore MD.

23-26—**DisClave, c/o 9617 Verdict Dr., Vienna VA 22031.** Ramada, New Carrollton MD. Anthony, Lake, Pavlat.

23-26—**MediaWestCon, 200 E. Thomas, Lansing MI 48906. (517) 372-0738.** Holiday Inn South. Multimedia fanzines.

23-26—**WisCon, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. (608) 233-8850.** Concourse Hotel. Melissa Scott. Feminism and SF.

23-26—**Year of the Wombat, 22 The City, Beeston Nottingham NG9 2ED, United Kingdom.** Bestwood Lodge.

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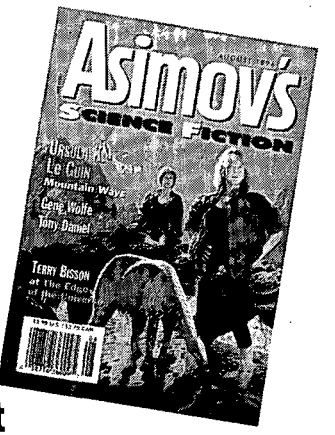

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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

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